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Integration of resettled Syrian refugees in Oxford:

Preliminary study in 2018

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1 Introduction

This working paper presents findings from the first phase of research entitled *Understanding the Integration of Syrian Refugee Families in Oxfordshire*, based in the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford. The study aims to understand the ways and degrees to which Syrian refugee families who came to Oxfordshire via the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) are adapting to their new lives in the United Kingdom.

Following the beginning of the civil war in Syria in 2011, widespread and extreme violence triggered the mass displacement of millions of Syrians. The speed with which Syria emptied of nearly 20% of its population shocked the world and left the humanitarian aid regime struggling to respond to the daunting scale and tempo of displacement from Syria (Chatty 2015). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) puts the number of refugees who have fled Syrian borders at 6.3 million, constituting the largest refugee population in the world (UNHCR 2018). Since the beginning of the conflict, Syria's neighbouring countries have hosted the vast majority of refugees, despite their own economic and political struggles and limited capacities to support such a large-scale refugee population.

The United Nations estimated that one in ten Syrian refugees hosted in these developing regions is in need of third-country resettlement (The National Audit Office 2016). In response to the Syrian refugee crisis and calls for countries in the Global North to do more, the UK government launched the SVPRS in 2014. In 2015, the then prime minister David Cameron announced intentions to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees from the Middle East and North Africa to the UK by May 2020 through the SVPRS (McGuinness 2017; UNHCR 2017). By the end December 2016, 5,454 refugees had been resettled in the UK spread over 200 local authorities through this scheme (UNHCR 2017).

In addition to voluntary repatriation and local integration, third-country resettlement is considered to be one of the three 'durable solutions' because it offers a permanent resolution to the plight of displacement. However, the overall success of resettlement as a solution depends not only on the acceptance of refugees by countries in the Global North, but also on their successful integration in their host countries and communities after arrival (Van Selm 2018). Yet post-resettlement integration is often overlooked as an area of focus by refugee policymakers and researchers, resulting in a striking lack of research on their post-resettlement lives (Betts 2017)

Although Oxford City Council passed a proposal to join SVPRS to accept Syrian refugee families following the announcement of the UK government in 2015, notably, the Council has not organised a systematic external assessment that looks at the adaptation of the new families in Oxford. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by investigating the integration processes experienced by these Syrian families, with the aim of highlighting policy implications for local authorities and refugee-supporting agencies.

At the inception of data collection in 2018, a total of 28 families had been received in Oxford via SVPRS.¹ For this initial round of research, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 families out of the 28 families currently in Oxford, and also interviewed staff members from Oxford City Council, community-based groups, and refugee-assisting NGOs between January and July 2018.

¹ In addition to the SVPRS, Oxford has received four families under the Vulnerable Children Resettlement Scheme and one family under Community Sponsorship.

2 Refugee integration in post-resettlement contexts

As numerous scholars highlight, ‘integration’ is a highly contested, complex and fluid concept (Korac 2009; Lomba 2010; Phillimore 2012; Phillimore & Goodson 2008; Spencer & Charsley 2016). According to Castles et al., ‘there is no single, generally accepted definition, theory or model of immigrant and refugee integration’ (2001: 12). Notwithstanding the absence of a unified definition, the issue related to integration continues to occupy a central seat in policy discussions around the adaptation of refugees and migrants (Bommes & Morawska 2009; Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore 2018). While the notion of integration does not lend itself to universal consensus, some common elements involved in integration can be identified from existing literature.

First, the literature highlights that integration should be viewed as a process rather than as a single event. Also, as Zetter et al. (2002) have noted, integration is not a linear process with a defined ‘end-state’. This observation rules out the conceptualisation of integration as a uniform path, consisting of sequential steps (Lomba 2010). Rather, integration is an ever-evolving and iterative process, meaning that attempts to measure outcomes at any given point in time are invariably a snapshot of a present moment, and not a permanent state (Spencer & Charsley 2016). Importantly, as existing studies illuminate, processes of integration can have a multitude of trajectories, which might vary considerably across and within different refugee populations, resulting in significant diversity in the experiences and outcomes of integration.

Next, much of the current scholarship supports the view that integration is a ‘two-way process’, in which both newcomers and hosts must undergo processes of adaptation and cooperation (Lomba 2010; Mestheneos & Ioannidi 2002; Phillimore & Goodson 2008; Spencer & Charsley 2016). This does not downplay the imperatives that newly resettled refugees must navigate in their path towards integration, for instance acquiring the necessary linguistic skills and developing cultural knowledge of the host society (Lomba 2010). However, it is important to note that host states and communities also must make preparations and efforts to welcome new arrivals and to accommodate the needs of a diverse population in order for integration to be successful (Spencer & Charsley 2016; UNHCR 2017).

Finally, existing research indicates that integration is a multi-dimensional process, taking place across a series of domains. In *Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies* (2012) proposed by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the process of integration is viewed as a ‘dynamic, multi-actor process of mutual engagement that facilitates effective participation by all members of a diverse society in the economic, political, social and cultural life’ (2012). More concretely, the public dimensions of integration can refer to a number of facets in the legal and social environment in which refugees find themselves, including their access to housing, education, employment and health (Lomba 2010). Meanwhile, the notion of integration should also be considered vis-à-vis its private dimensions – meaning refugees’ actual situations, their socio-cultural adjustments, as well as their own perceptions (Korac 2009; Phillimore 2012)

Current scholarship takes pains to emphasise the complicated, multi-faceted nature of integration processes undertaken by refugees and migrants. Various attempts have been made to operationalise this conceptual complexity through the identification of key indicators. Amongst these attempts, one of the most notable and widely used integration frameworks is one developed by Ager and Strang (2004, 2008, 2010). This framework endeavours to operationalise the concept of integration in four domains: 1) access to employment, housing, education and health; 2) facilitators and barriers – language, culture and the local environment; 3) social connections within and between groups within

the community; and 4) foundation – access to citizenship and rights. This paper draws upon Ager and Strang’s conceptual framework as a way to organise findings and discussions around the integration processes of Syrian refugees in Oxford.

3 Research context

The SVPRS was initially introduced in 2014 by the UK Government with the aim of providing a safe and legal route for certain categories of the ‘most vulnerable’ Syrian refugees to travel to the UK. Whilst the UK Government’s priority remained the delivery of direct assistance in the Middle East region, it recognised that for certain individuals the best option was to provide resettlement support in the UK (UNHCR 2017). The scheme specifically offers resettlement to Syrian refugees who meet UNHCR’s ‘vulnerability criteria’ and reside in countries neighbouring Syria, rather than to those who had already travelled to Europe (McGuinness 2017).

The vast majority of Syrian refugees sought refuge in neighbouring countries including Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Each country adopted different policies towards the reception and treatment of Syrian refugees, as elucidated by Chatty (2015):

Turkey set up its own refugee camps for those most vulnerable, but generally supported self-settlement; Lebanon refused to allow the international humanitarian aid regime to set up formal refugee camps; and Jordan prevaricated for nearly a year and then insisted upon the setting up of a massive United Nations refugee camp...Lebanon and Jordan have not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, and although Turkey has signed the Convention, it has reserved its interpretation of it to apply only to Europeans seeking refuge/asylum in Turkey. The UN estimates that over 60% of the Syrian refugee flow across international borders is self-settling in cities, towns and villages where they have social networks.

All the 14 SVPRS families we interviewed first fled from Syria to one of these neighbouring countries, and most of them experienced many difficulties in the years before they were resettled in the UK. For instance, one Syrian refugee family who were resettled in Oxford in late 2015 after spending two years in Turkey described their life there as very challenging:

We didn’t want to live in camps so we stayed in a town called Kasara. We rented a room but it was very hard to pay it. Myself and one of my sons were working as casual labour. We did many things to survive – porter and cleaner. We didn’t get much support from UN agencies. Only sporadic food support but the amount was not enough.

Once SVPRS families are selected by UNHCR and the UK government, the allocation of where they are to be received within the UK is determined by local governments who join the resettlement scheme. The decision of local authorities to accept Syrian refugees is usually based on four main considerations: first, availability of suitable and affordable housing; second, the availability of school places with appropriate support where required; third, accessibility of hospitals, general practices and other clinics; and fourth, assurances from the police and community safety teams that relocation to a specific location presents minimal risk to local safety and community cohesion (UNHCR 2017).

In 2015, Oxford City Council passed a proposal to accept 10 Syrian refugee families. This decision was reviewed in 2016 and again in 2017, with a decision being made to take a further 10 families each year. At the inception of this study in 2018, a total of 28 families had been received in central Oxford via SVPRS.²

Oxford City Council secures accommodation for the refugee families and commissions support services. Once SVPRS families are received in Oxford, contracted NGOs (Asylum Welcome, Connection Support, and Refugee Resource) assist the newly arrived Syrians. These aid agencies provide guidance on daily life in Oxford and help to facilitate their ‘settling in’ process. In addition, they are responsible for helping newly arrived refugees meet their basic needs, arranging access to medical and educational services, helping them to enrol in English lessons, and supporting their search for employment. The stated objective of these supporting agencies is to enable Syrian families to be ‘integrated’ into Oxford, which is most often discussed with reference to achieving ‘self-reliance’. In an ideal scenario, this means that Syrian families no longer need to rely on commissioned support providers but can either manage independently or have the knowledge and skills to be able to independently access the support they require, such as welfare services.

At the time of this study, most of the families had already spent a few years in Oxford. As this paper discusses, the process of adapting into a completely new living environment presents new opportunities but also poses considerable adjustment challenges. The next section illustrates some of these challenges and opportunities experienced by the resettled Syrian families.

4 Findings on integration

As discussed above, this paper organises preliminary findings in line with the conceptual framework of refugee integration proposed by Ager and Strang. The framework identifies four core domains that it considers central to ‘successful integration’ and sets up specific areas of assessment of integration, such as employment, housing, language, social relations, and access to citizenship and rights, as follows.

1) Access to employment, housing, education and health

Employment

There is significant evidence on the importance of employment to successful integration (Somerville & Wintour 2006). Employment has also consistently been identified as a key factor that influences a multitude of outcomes, including promoting economic independence, planning for the future, providing opportunity to develop language skills, and restoring self-esteem (Bloch 1999; Tomlinson & Egan 2002).

Amongst the 14 families interviewed, only four households had members with some form of employment at the point of research. One reason for this limited number is that most of the interviewed refugees arrived in Oxford in the past one to two years and have been encouraged to prioritise English language learning by the supporting agencies over their search for employment. During the initial transition period, these families are supported by unemployment benefits from the government. One respondent, a male refugee in his 40s, explained to us further in his interview.

² At the time of this research, there were SVPRS families located outside the centre in different districts: eight families in South Oxford, six families in West Oxford, and six families in Cherwell.

Interviewer: Are you currently working in Oxford?

Respondent: No, not working now. Now first thing I want to do is to study English. This is the most important thing for our life here. Without knowing it, we cannot find a job and we cannot communicate.

Interviewer: Are you studying English now?

Respondent: Yes, I am taking English courses at the school. I go there 4 days a week and 3-4 hours per day.

Interviewer: Do you want to work in the future?

Respondent: Yes, I want to work and want to continue carpentry. Even in Syria, I was doing that.

While almost all interviewed refugees expressed their strong intention to work, they also acknowledged the ways in which limited command of English poses a barrier for their job-search in Oxford. A male refugee who arrived in Oxford in 2017 after spending four years in Jordan told us, “I want to find a work that suits to my expertise. But first I need to learn English. This takes time.” In Syria, he was working for an audio-visual company and applied for two related posts in the UK but both applications were unsuccessful due to his limited English skills.

The four interviewees who had found employment were not necessarily able to find jobs that matched their skill sets or longer-term career interests. One male refugee, who came to Oxford in 2017 from Egypt, is working part-time at an Arabic restaurant washing dishes. Before the outbreak of civil war, he was running a manufacturing company making car batteries in Syria. Upon his arrival in Oxford, he looked for manufacturing-related jobs but could not find anything. Now he works 24 hours per week with an hourly minimum wage. The other three respondents were also employed in the food sector and reported similar working conditions.

As the examples above indicate, most of those who were resettled in Oxford had specific vocational skills and professions before their displacement from Syria, and they all expressed a desire in the long term to find employment that allows them to capitalise on their existing expertise.

On the other hand, for some SVPRS refugees, mostly women, it is the first time they have ever searched for a job in the formal sector. During interviews, some of these women expressed their concerns about finding employment in the UK due to their little work experience and lack of vocational skills, in addition to limited language capacity.

Housing

Housing has an important effect on refugees’ overall physical and psychological wellbeing, particularly in the ways in which it contributes to an ability to feel ‘at home’ (Ager and Strang 2008; Glover et al. 2001).

All resettled refugees who come to Oxford via SVPRS are provided with housing in the private sector by Oxford City Council, arranged prior to their arrival. As a result, all 14 families reported having secured flats or houses appropriate for their household size. Their living locations are dispersed across the city and rent is covered by a combination of public benefits and a top up payment from SVPRS funding. Refugees who start to work are also required to pay a portion of the rent themselves.

Almost all interviewees expressed their satisfaction with their current housing arrangements in Oxford. Most of these families suffered from poor housing conditions in their first asylum countries in the Middle East; therefore, all families noted that their quality of housing had significantly improved since then.

However, several families expressed shock at the extraordinarily high rent prices in Oxford and shared their concerns about whether they would be able to cover the full cost of rent in the future. For instance, one male refugee in his early 30s now living in a 3-bedroom house with his wife and three children, said:

Our monthly rent is £1,350. Now the government is helping with our rent but in the future we will have to cover this expense by ourselves. As I have some medical problems, I am anxious whether I can manage it.

This is a plausible concern, given the high cost of rent and property in Central Oxford (relative to national averages) as well as the difficulties refugees described in securing full-time employment.

Education

Education plays multiple roles in facilitating the process of refugee integration. It provides skills and competences that can subsequently support employment, thereby enabling people to become more productive and self-sufficient. For refugee children and youth in particular (and by extension, parents), schools become one of the most important places of first contact with members of local host communities, playing an important role in establishing perceptions and connections with receiving communities (Ager & Strang 2008).

Across the different domains of integration, access to education appears to be one in which resettled families in Oxford have made significant advancement since their arrival. Of the interviewed families with school-aged children, all of these children have been already enrolled in the UK public education system. When we asked them generally about positive changes since arriving in Oxford, most families raised access to education as one of the most appreciated services offered by the SVPRS.

During their asylum in Middle Eastern neighbouring countries, many Syrian families struggled to access quality and affordable education for their children. Comparatively, parents reported high satisfaction with the quality of the educational system in Oxford, as well as their children's progress in English language acquisition. These families believe that education is a crucial investment for the future integration of their children in the UK and consequently give it high priority.

Whereas almost all interviewed families appreciated their access to the UK's education system for their children, some also exhibited concerns about their children losing their traditional Syrian or Arabic cultural values as they become deeply embedded in the Western system. One male refugee with three teenaged children noted:

I want my children to study in the education system in the UK. But I want to raise them as Syrians...I want my children to maintain our religious and cultural values – I don't want them to kiss on the street.

Caught between dual cultural values, some parents appeared uncertain about what would be the best outcomes for their children in terms of facilitating the integration process.

Health

Good health enables better participation in society, and access to appropriate healthcare services highlights the responsiveness of society to the needs of new members (Johnson 2006). In the case of refugees, physical and mental health should be given particular attention since they are likely to experience higher degrees of physical and mental trauma than other groups of migrants (Connor 2010).

As the title of ‘The Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme’ indicates, the UK government has actively sought to accept families with specific vulnerabilities, such as health issues, under this resettlement programme. Several of the interviewed families have family members with serious health problems and expressed high levels of satisfaction with their access to advanced medical facilities in Oxford. For instance, one Syrian family whose husband has a kidney-related ailment expressed appreciation that he has been able to receive proper medical treatment in Oxford. During four years of exile in Egypt, he was unable to receive adequate healthcare and his condition deteriorated greatly.

Nevertheless, several respondents also noted some significant challenges. The most common reason given for dissatisfaction with medical services in Oxford was primarily associated with a lack of Arabic and English translation support at local clinics and hospitals. Since most of the SVPRS families have very limited English proficiency, the lack of translation support makes it difficult for them to communicate with healthcare staff or read appointment and results letters received from the NHS written only in English. Particularly for those with serious medical issues, lack of access to Arabic medical translation services created anxiety. One male refugee who recently experienced these challenges explained:

I had heart surgery in November 2017 [in Oxford]...A few days ago, I felt strong pain so went to see doctor for emergency but the translator was not proficient with Arabic and did not know some words I used. I became concerned whether my situation was communicated accurately to the doctor.

While these families have attempted to rely on Arabic-speaking staff working at the refugee-assisting NGOs or fellow Syrian migrants with better English, these workarounds are not always available or dependable. Therefore, even though access to health facilities has been secured, language barriers can undermine the functionality of such services.

2) Facilitators and barriers – language, culture and safety

Language and cultural knowledge

One of the most significant factors for refugee integration is proficiency in the predominant spoken language and acquisition of broader cultural knowledge. Unsurprisingly, being able to speak English – the main language of the host community – is consistently identified as key to integration in the UK (Collyer et al. 2017; Home Office 2006).

Respondents reported extremely low levels of English language ability, and also consistently identified this as one of the major challenges in adapting to life in the UK. Our research found that those with weaker language abilities tend to struggle more in everyday life and reported more stress than those with better English skills. One male refugee interviewee commented:

The most prominent challenge for us is no doubt English. Lack of English makes all aspects of our lives hard. I don't know which buses I should take and what the contents are in food items at shops.

In this case, this person also explained that he stopped schooling in grade 5 in Syria, making him illiterate in his mother tongue of Arabic, which he feels makes his English lessons even more difficult to grasp.

Refugee-assisting NGOs and Oxford City Council are aware of the communication challenges that SVPRS families face. One NGO staff member noted:

Now the maximum hours of English lessons for SVPRP refugees is 8 hours per week due to funding from Home Office. But 8 hours is very limited. Though Oxford is a very diverse place, almost all announcements are in English only...Job centre and hospitals can only provide services in English. This must be very stressful for refugees.

According to the refugee-assisting NGOs, several families have been struggling to make progress in even the pre-entry levels of English language programmes since their arrival in the UK. These families will likely continue to face challenges in the pathway to integration, as English remains a precondition for accessing most public and private services and facilities in Oxford.

Notably, to mitigate these language handicaps, university students in Oxford have organised volunteer groups for assisting Syrian refugee families primarily through provision of English language training. An organiser of one of these groups explained:

In 2017, four students initiated this volunteer group to support Syrian refugee families in Oxford. Now we have a total 19 student volunteers for 10 refugee families...The main activity is teaching English for both children and parents and helping with the children's homework...The demand for English teaching is very strong which is understandable [given their limited language capacity].

In addition to English lessons, these volunteer groups also provide translation support for families if they struggle to understand the letters and documents sent to them in English. However, this is not an ideal alternative since volunteers noted: “we cannot always assist with it [medical translation] since it sometimes requires very specialised knowledge. It should be done by professional medical translators”.

Safety and security

Safety and security are fundamental for wellbeing and successful integration. Previous research has found that refugees feel more ‘at home’ in their localities if locals see them as ‘peaceful’ (Ager & Strang 2008). Here, safety and security are not only understood in terms of actual physical violence but also verbal abuse and discriminatory treatment that could be perceived as ‘threatening’ to refugees.

Without exception, all 14 families expressed no concerns about safety and security in Oxford. No respondents reported any xenophobic encounters or cases of discriminatory practices since their arrival. It is possible that this could stem from Oxford's history of hosting other migrant communities from Arabic-speaking countries and the fact that the city has a generally liberal attitude towards migration. The following comment of a female refugee respondent is illustrative, as she notes: *“People in Oxford are patient with my English. They don't laugh at our poor language. They encourage us to speak in English and try to understand us.”*

When asked about perceptions of safety and security in Oxford, a Syrian refugee couple, who had spent five years in Jordan, responded: *“Our life here is so peaceful and calm. Things are in order and systematic. People are friendly and don't discriminate against us. They don't interfere with our daily life”*. In contrast, they described experiencing frequent harassment in Jordan due to their Syrian identities.

Since most SVPRS families survived the conflict in Syria and then experienced varying degrees of discrimination in their first countries of asylum, it is very likely that this comparison influences their perception of safety and security in the UK. Regardless, all of the families interviewed expressed that they were very satisfied with security in Oxford.

3) Social connections within and between groups within the community

Social connectedness is a critical element in integration processes for forced migrants. As refugees have been forced to leave their familiar social and cultural milieu and usually suffer a loss or weakening of pre-existing support networks, they find themselves compelled to build new social networks in a brand new, unfamiliar environment (Hebbani et al. 2017). Social connections play an instrumental role in removing barriers and facilitating the process of adjustment for SVPRS families in Oxford.

Amongst the various types of social connections, our research found that connections with fellow Syrians or people from other Arabic-speaking countries are considered crucial by resettled Syrian families, primarily because of a shared common language which makes communication easier. Those who came to Oxford via SVPRS arrived at different times and did not know each other before being resettled in Oxford. However, upon their arrival, they met at language schools and events or meetings held at refugee-supporting agencies, or at mosques and churches, and came to know each other over time. The communication between them is dense and frequent; for instance, they exchange information about where to buy halal food items and how to use social services. They also frequently assist one another when a family needs support due to illness or emergencies.

Networks with Syrian non-refugee migrants in Oxford also exist. Some SVPRS families mentioned that they communicate with other Syrians to seek advice because these migrants have lived in Oxford for longer periods. One SVPRS family revealed that they borrowed £700 from a Syrian non-refugee business person when they experienced a personal emergency.

Similarly, connections with non-Syrian Arab people living in Oxford were also noted as important, with one respondent explaining:

I have met many Arabic speaking people in Oxford. They are Iraqi, Sudanese and Egyptians. I met them through social gathering and events. Sometimes we met inside a bus. I found a Muslim dressed woman and spoke to her. Then we became friends.

In some cases, these new contacts with non-Syrian Arab people play a facilitatory role in helping resettled Syrians to access employment. For example, a male refugee in his 20s – one of the four Syrian refugees interviewed who is currently employed – found work as a cooking assistant at a fast-food restaurant through a personal contact with an Egyptian migrant living in Oxford.

Additionally, networks established through community-based organisations set up by refugees themselves also play a critical role in supporting resettled families with day-to-day integration challenges. At the time of writing, there are three to four refugee-run community organisations operating in Oxford. According to an interview with the founder of one of the groups established in 2015, the group aims to complement the work of formal refugee-assisting NGOs by providing guidance and support around integration challenges facing SVPRS families in Oxford.

Out of the various types of support this group offers, translation support was identified as particularly useful for resettled families, given their limited English proficiency. The group also organises a weekly meeting at a community hall, and occasionally members cook Syrian food together, chat in Arabic and talk about adjusting to life in the UK. This regular get-together not only serves the purpose of providing information about daily life in Oxford, but also helps to avoid isolation amongst SVPRS families by ensuring they have community support.

4) Foundation – access to citizenship and rights

Integration processes should ideally provide pathways to residency and citizenship for refugees in their receiving country, along with associated rights and responsibilities. All families who are resettled in the UK via SVPRS are granted refugee status with corresponding rights. As discussed above, the SVPRS families also have access to public funds including employment services and housing support.

SVPRS families are granted a right to residency in the UK for the initial five years upon arrival. After spending a minimum of five years in the UK, they are entitled to apply for permanent residency and then eventually citizenship like other foreign nationals.

While the interviewed families emphasised a desire to maintain their Syrian identity, almost all of them expressed an intent to secure permanent residency and subsequent citizenship in the UK. This strong interest in residency and citizenship is closely linked with fears around the continued protracted conflict and precarious political climate in Syria. One Syrian interviewee commented:

Syria is still in war. I don't think we can go back there. The UK is our new country. We are facing some challenges but we want to be integrated and obtain citizenship here.

These comments were echoed by other resettled Syrian families. Most were very keen to learn more about how to access and secure UK permanent residency and citizenship. In fact, as immigrants to the UK ourselves, we received numerous questions from them during interviews regarding procedures related to residency and citizenship in the UK context.

5 Lessons learnt from the initial research

Overall, the degree of satisfaction about their new life in Oxford is generally very high across interviewed SVPRS families. While their lives are not without challenges, these families report feeling significant improvements in most aspects of life in Oxford compared to those in their first asylum country. They also express strong intentions to become well-integrated into Oxford and broader British society. In order to further facilitate their adjustment process, and as a way to augment their own efforts and those of various other refugee-assisting stakeholders, this section will discuss the key lessons and policy implications which emerged from this preliminary study.

English as a foundational skill

Unsurprisingly, the significance of English language capacity was highlighted throughout our preliminary findings as an underpinning factor for successful adaptation to living in a new country. English proficiency affects almost every aspect of refugees' new lives in Oxford and was referenced as a major obstacle for obtaining a job and accessing medical services. In contrast to the conceptual framework of integration by Ager & Strang (2008), which posits language as one of a number of facilitating factors, it may be more appropriate to understand language acquisition as a foundational skill that is required before other types of integration can occur.

While providing more language lessons for the SVPRS families would certainly be helpful, it is also important for Oxford City Council and refugee-supporting NGOs to realise that in some cases a limited educational background and limited Arabic language literacy can further slow the language acquisition process. For such cases, it may be necessary to think about a different approach to enhance spoken English abilities, in addition to the provision of normal language lessons. In response to these identified challenges, Oxford City Council is thinking about increasing the number of lessons offered to SVPRS families and also revisiting the teaching modalities.

Specialised support for medical cases

Strengthening English proficiency is essential for promoting refugees' integration in Oxford, and practising learned language skills in daily life is perhaps one of the best ways to acquire English. However, for individuals with specific medical challenges, it is sensible to consider the provision of specialised medical translation support.

As described above, when lack of English capacity is coupled with medical problems, the level of anxiety and frustration that refugee families face can become intensified. Moreover, given the highly technical nature of medical terms and knowledge, it is too risky to count on ad-hoc translation support from fellow refugees or student-led groups in cases of serious health problems. Because provision of medical translation and interpretation services to refugees falls outside the direct responsibility of local governments and refugee-supporting service providers, this issue requires the involvement of other institutions responsible for these challenges and should be discussed amongst a wider range of stakeholders.

Employment support

At this point, only a few individuals from resettled families have secured employment. But almost all interviewees were working in Syria and expressed a strong desire to find work in the UK as they improve their language skills. Many have vocational skills and expertise which they acquired in Syria before displacement, such as driving, cooking, or mechanics.

One possible way to facilitate the job search for these individuals with certain sets of marketable skills is to build a database that includes information on the vocational background of resettled families and to set up a matching system between individuals resettled through SVPRS and potential employers in Oxford. This can help refugees utilise their existing skills to meet labour demands in Oxford or other areas and ideally create a ‘win-win’ situation while promoting refugees’ participation in the labour markets.

Needless to say, finding meaningful employment for refugees should not be reduced to merely matching demand and supply of existing vocational skills of resettled refugees. Therefore, in the long term, opportunities for individuals to gain new skills and explore new employment opportunities beyond existing skillsets should be considered by host local authorities and refugee-supporting NGOs. This is especially important for the younger generations. Exploring and providing new vocational skills where local demands exist can expand the avenues to meaningful employment for SVPRS refugees.

Planning for an adjustment period

Whereas a key goal for service providers and Oxford City Council is to enable Syrian families to attain ‘self-reliance’ in their new environment, our research underlines the necessity of also providing adequate time for initial adjustment for newly arrived families. Since most families have never lived outside Syria prior to displacement, a transitional period following resettlement is needed. For example, as briefly mentioned above, for female refugees with little to no working experience, it can take longer time to adjust to the UK labour market and working culture.

Particularly for families with members suffering from physical or mental health problems, the pursuit of self-reliance may need to be planned, encouraged and assisted as a long-term goal, rather than immediate objective. According to Belghazi (2018), even if resettled refugees are equipped with the vocational skills necessary to find employment, traumas endured and the upheaval of displacement can require a long healing process. In such cases, refugee-assisting organisations should create individualised support plans that take into consideration the mental and physical health needs of individuals and households.

The role of community support groups

While refugee-supporting NGOs indeed play a central role in promoting refugees’ integration process, community-based organisations also make important contributions in resolving the day-to-day challenges faced by resettled SVPRS families in Oxford. For refugees, these community groups are often more accessible than formal refugee-assisting NGOs since such groups are usually run by fellow nationals or refugees who have experienced similar adjustment challenges. Furthermore, these groups provide a gathering place and help to connect resettled families living in a new place. In addition, the student-led voluntary groups also play a crucial role in helping resettled families, especially with language support. Similar to community-based organisations, they are accessible and more flexible in responding to the needs of refugee families.

Given their contributions, policymakers should consider ways to more systematically support the development and operation of such initiatives in order to more effectively complement the support provided by formal NGOs. Additionally, as addressed above, it is important to note that technical areas like medical translation and counselling need to be provided through professional services rather than relying on informal support from community groups or volunteers.

Pathways to stabilised residency and status

As highlighted above, despite some adjustment challenges, almost all resettled Syrian families enjoy their new lives in Oxford and have strong interest in acquiring permanent residency and subsequent citizenship in the future. Dissemination of more information regarding these procedures would be useful to these families, since some of them remain unclear about how to obtain permanent residency. Because the process of integration should be considered a ‘two-way process’, hosting local authorities should explain the necessary processes and offer a clear long-term trajectory towards permanent residency and, ultimately, citizenship. Having a clear understanding about their eligibility and requirements for residency and legal status will ultimately contribute to refugees’ ability to ‘achieve their full potential as members of British society, to contribute to the community, and become fully able to exercise the rights and responsibilities’ (Home Office 2005).

6 Ways forward

This working paper is based on findings from an initial study between January and July 2018, which broadly investigated the different aspects of integration for Syrian refugee families resettled in central Oxford. As discussed above, several key recommendations became apparent through the research, including the need for increased language training and job-seeking support for Syrian refugee families.

Our next step is to conduct follow up research. As discussed earlier, refugee integration should be seen as a process that takes place over several years, if not more. This paper offers a preliminary snapshot of this evolving process; in order to understand whether and how SVPRS families continue to adapt to their new lives in the UK, it is essential to follow resettled families over various periods of time. This type of longitudinal study is especially necessary if Oxford City Council intends to facilitate SVPRS refugees in becoming ‘self-reliant’ and ‘socio-economically independent’ in Oxford.

The second phase of this project will aim to revisit original participants and families from the first phase, and will also include other refugee families who were not part of the pilot study. For comparative analysis, the scope of the study will be expanded to include other SVPRS families who were settled in other districts of Oxfordshire, and those Syrian refugees who did not use SVPRS but spontaneously chose to settle in Oxford on their own.

Beyond the immediate local context of Oxford, the follow-up study on post-resettlement lives of refugees will aim to inform the international refugee regime’s policies and practices more broadly. As a durable solution, the success of third-country resettlement depends largely on the integration outcomes of resettled refugees and their hosts. If resettlement is to be useful as a protection tool and a durable solution for protracted displacement, nurturing an in-depth understanding of the various trajectories of refugee integration in new environments will be indispensable for both receiving governments and national and international refugee policymakers.

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