

STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING INTEGRATION AT THE CITY REGION LEVEL

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The Covid-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges for the integration of migrant communities. The social distancing measures necessary to protect public health have placed strict limits on community contact and forced many vulnerable groups into isolation. Many migrant workers – who often have no access to public funds due to conditions imposed on their visa – have been at particular risk of economic hardship and destitution. And limits on face-to-face contact and funding pressures have disrupted the work of community groups and English language providers, further weakening support structures for people in the immigration system (Migration Exchange 2020).

But as the crisis subsides, England's city region mayors – who represent more than half of the UK's migrant population (ONS 2021a) – can play a vital role in helping their communities to reconnect.¹ Much of the focus of integration policy in recent years has been at the national level – where central government strategies and overall funding levels are determined – or at the local level –

¹ In this briefing, where we refer to 'city region mayors' we mean the directly elected leaders of combined authorities (including Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, North of Tyne, Sheffield City Region, Tees Valley, West Midlands, West of England, and West Yorkshire), as well as the mayor of London. While the Greater London Authority is technically not a mayoral combined authority, we include the mayor of London in our definition of city region mayors for ease of reference.

where support for the integration of migrant communities is delivered. But given the growing extent of devolution to combined authorities, mayors are increasingly in a prime position to shape the integration of communities in their city regions (Katwala et al 2017).

Moreover, over the course of the pandemic, city region mayors have played an important leadership role, using their platforms to communicate with the public and negotiate on the Covid-19 response with central government. Even where their powers and budgetary responsibilities are still limited, this shows how mayors can play a vital role in shaping the narrative on integration, convening partners across the region, and pursuing policy change in Whitehall.

In the short briefing, we discuss how city region mayors can take action at the combined authority level to support the integration of recent migrant communities. We will explore what powers they have and how they can use these powers to show leadership on the integration agenda.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

The Covid-19 crisis has had profound implications for social cohesion (Broadhead et al 2020). Social distancing rules have meant that in many cases communities have been unable to physically come together over the past year. Reduced contact with others has had a significant impact on personal wellbeing and mental health (ONS 2021b). One of the first major studies on cohesion in England during the pandemic has found a significant decline in perceived cohesion across five different dimensions, including fewer people talking with neighbours and lower levels of neighbourhood trust. This impact was not equally felt. Perceptions of cohesion fell particularly among residents of disadvantaged communities and those from Black, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi backgrounds (and those defined as from 'other' minority ethnic backgrounds) (Borkowska and Laurence 2020).

Communities have responded to this challenge in different ways: some areas, in particular those which have invested in social cohesion, have exhibited greater resilience in the face of the pandemic, including a stronger sense of neighbourliness and higher levels of social engagement (Abrams et al 2021). Research from the Local Trust has found that areas with stronger community infrastructure have been more effective at adapting their activities to meet the needs of the pandemic, while other areas have struggled to deliver as coordinated a response (McCabe et al 2020). Moreover, some local authorities have reported concerns over undercurrents of community tensions as the lockdowns have continued (Hill 2020).

As the UK recovers from the pandemic and the immediate public health challenge recedes, it will become increasingly important to focus on recognising these challenges and supporting community integration. An integrated community, as defined by the government's integrated community strategy, is one where "people – whatever their background – live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities" (MHCLG 2018). Integration is therefore a matter for all residents; everyone has a role in fostering and benefitting from good community relations.

But newcomers to a community can face specific barriers which make it harder to integrate (Oliver and Gidley 2015, OECD 2015). In particular, recent migrants may not speak fluent English; they may be in more precarious economic circumstances; they may face discrimination; and they may experience difficulties accessing services due to their immigration status. These types of barriers can make it harder for newcomers to find work, access essentials, and become a part of their community.

Importantly, these are all policy areas where city region mayors and combined authorities can act to support integration in their city regions. In recent years, the UK government has devolved a series of new powers to combined authorities in England, covering policy areas ranging from adult skills and economic development to transport and housing. While devolution is piecemeal and much power is still concentrated in Whitehall, in a number of areas city regions now have the flexibility to forge their own approach on integration policy.

In the following part of this briefing, we will explore how city region mayors can pursue ambitious agendas in their areas to tackle the barriers inhibiting the integration of new communities and to support social cohesion across their city regions. We will focus on three areas of policy: promoting English language provision, tackling economic exclusion, and creating save services.

SUPPORTING INTEGRATION AT THE CITY REGION LEVEL

1. Promoting high-quality English language provision

English language provision is broadly regarded as a core pillar of integration policy (Casey 2016). Understanding English is critical for finding employment, navigating key services, and meeting new people. According to previous IPPR analysis, around 15 per cent of EU migrants and 16 per cent of non-EU migrants whose first language at home is not English state that language barriers cause

them problems in finding or keeping a job (Morris and Hochlaf 2019). Those born outside the UK whose first language at home is not English tend to have lower earnings compared to their counterparts whose first language is English; and earlier research has found a link between English fluency, employment levels, and earnings (Fernández-Reino 2019).

Yet there is currently a lack of strategic direction on English language at the national level. Over recent years, funding for ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) has reduced significantly in England. The most recent data suggests ESOL funding fell from £227 million in 2009/10 to £99 million in 2016/17 (in 2016/17 prices) (HCL 2018). A recent survey of English language providers for the Department of Education found that nearly three quarters reported significant demand for English language provision and around two thirds said it was difficult to meet demand (Higton et al 2019). Moreover, there are signs that the pandemic has placed further pressure on ESOL provision. An inquiry in 2020 by the House of Commons Education Committee found that the pandemic has had a particularly acute effect on ESOL learners due to difficulties in engaging through digital platforms (Education Committee 2020).

City region mayors now have a new opportunity to lead the way in supporting migrants to improve their English language skills. Over the past couple of years, the government has devolved the adult education budget (AEB) to most mayoral combined authorities across England, giving them control over a budget which includes funding for ESOL (ESFA 2018). This means that combined authorities have new flexibilities over how to commission and coordinate ESOL provision in their city regions.

Currently, the baseline funding position in England is to fully fund ESOL learning up to level 2 for unemployed individuals aged 19 and over. Others aged 19 and over are offered 'co-funding' – ie there is funding available for half the costs and the individual pays for the other half. There is an exemption for people employed on low wages, who are eligible for full funding.² This is the funding system followed by ESFA (Education and Skills Funding Agency) for parts of England where the AEB has not been devolved, though combined authorities can choose to take a different approach (ESFA 2021).

Many combined authorities have already started experimenting with their new powers over ESOL funding. Some have increased the low-wage threshold for full funding, opening up free provision for more learners (eg Greater London

² There are also restrictions on the eligibility of learners depending on their immigration status and circumstances (eg typically a non-EEA learner must have been ordinarily resident in the UK for at least three years).

Authority 2019). There have also been a number of new approaches developed across different city regions:

- The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) asked local providers to produce a review of ESOL, which offered a series of recommendations for improving provision through more effective collaboration and coordination. The review recommended that the WMCA develop an 'ESOL for Employment' offer to connect English language provision with job training for sectors where migrants tend to work, such as construction, health and social care (WMCA 2019a; WMCA 2019b).
- The North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) has begun to provide strategic oversight over ESOL funding, encouraging a move towards more occupation-focused courses. It is also adapting the tendering process to give small providers greater opportunities to bid for allocations. By 2022/23, the NTCA is planning an expansion of ESOL provision capacity of 36 per cent (based on a shift towards learner payment for some courses) (Migration Yorkshire 2021; LGA 2020).
- The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCR) has through its adult education budget initiated 'Test and Learn' pilots for ESOL and other areas of adult education to fund innovative approaches to meet regional skills needs. Providers were offered to bid for up to £50,000 funding with "no strings attached" to facilitate innovation. They were encouraged to think about approaches which develop pre-entry level provision for people with literacy barriers, which set up peer language conversation clubs, and which test out more intensive teaching in smaller groups (LCR 2020; Rotherham 2020).
- The Greater London Authority (GLA) has introduced an 'ESOL Plus' pilot programme to address gaps in provision for those with particular needs.³ This has included: £80,000 in funding for 'ESOL Plus – Childcare' to support learners with childcare responsibilities; £20,000 in funding for 'ESOL Plus – Employer Partnership' to support provision for employees and help make a case for employer investment in ESOL; and £100,000 in funding for 'ESOL Plus Arts' to combine English language provision with creative and heritage activities (GLA 2021).

As the UK recovers from the pandemic, there are further opportunities for mayors to lead the way on English language support in their city regions. Mayors can use their new powers over the adult education budget to experiment further with ESOL provision. There are clear limits on what can be done: funding for ESOL is tightly constrained and mayors cannot easily extend provision without further resources from central government. But there are options for mayors to

³ Note that the mayor of London's 'ESOL Plus' programme is not funded directly from the adult education budget.

leverage additional funds, to coordinate provision, and to deliver more effective and tailored support. These include exploring:

- **Partnering with employers in the region to co-fund ESOL provision for their migrant employees**

To maximise the funding available for ESOL provision, mayors could partner with regional employers who recruit large numbers of migrants with English language barriers. Mayors could provide match funding through the AEB for employers to organise workplace ESOL learning. This would help to engage employers in the process of integration and support spreading ESOL provision across the region more widely.

- **Working with community groups to develop 'ESOL for integration' programmes**

As noted above, the WMCA's ESOL review has argued that English language courses can benefit from being more tailored to individual needs. 'ESOL for employment' courses are therefore an important way for exploring how provision can be less generic and more relevant to individuals' progression in the labour market.

However, the labour market is not the only relevant consideration for effective integration; ESOL is also vital for building community contact and helping people to get to know more about their local area. Combined authorities could therefore use the AEB devolution to develop more tailored 'ESOL for integration' programmes for their region. These courses could be developed in partnership with community and migrant groups to ensure they reflect the needs and priorities of learners. They could include non-accredited delivery to help support learners who would initially benefit from more informal community-based provision before starting formal classes. Working in partnership with grassroots groups to develop the programme could help to support community outreach and ensure that the ESOL programme complements wider regional efforts to support integration.

- **Encouraging innovation in ESOL provision through 'test and learn' pilots**

Liverpool City Region is the first combined authority to experiment with 'test and learn' pilots for adult education through the AEB, including for ESOL. In order to

test out and explore innovative approaches to ESOL provision, other city region mayors could use part of their adult education budgets to introduce similar 'no strings attached' pilots. This would enable combined authorities to test out new ways to deliver ESOL teaching, which could then be evaluated and refined in future years.

- **Leveraging additional funds from central government**

Finally, mayors could seek additional funds from central government to bolster English language provision in their city regions. In particular, the Shared Prosperity Fund (discussed further below) could be a valuable opportunity for securing further resources. These funds could potentially be used to complement ESOL provision with other types of English language support, such as preparation courses for IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exams to help people who need to prove a sufficient level of proficiency to work in a skilled profession (eg as a healthcare professional).

2. Supporting economic inclusion

A successful integration policy requires economic security: if people cannot afford the basic essentials, then they are less likely to have the resources or the time to participate in community life (Borkowska and Laurence 2020). Our 'Communities up Close' research on integration in Yorkshire and the Humber found that the underlying economic conditions in a neighbourhood played a vital role in shaping community relations. Where residents were working long hours for low pay, they had less time or energy to meet with neighbours; where communities could not access sufficient funding, they were held back from integration efforts; and where housing conditions were poor and overcrowded, local tensions could emerge (Mort and Morris 2020).

There are a number of ways in which people within the immigration system are more likely to face economic hardship. Non-EU born migrants tend to have higher unemployment rates than the UK-born, while EU-born migrants from Central and Eastern Europe tend to have lower earnings (Fernández-Reino and Rienzo 2021). Non-UK households are more likely to experience overcrowded housing conditions (Vargas-Silva and Fernández-Reino 2019). In general, temporary visas have a 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) condition attached, which prevents visa holders from accessing mainstream benefits. Moreover, the pandemic has placed particular pressure on people in the immigration system, many of whom work in sectors that have been closed as a result of the lockdown and who are unable to access benefits due to their immigration status (Morris 2020a).

A key pillar of any city region integration strategy should therefore be supporting economic inclusion. In particular, mayors could consider taking the following steps:

- **Factoring the talents and skills of migrants into local economic plans**

Mayors lead on economic planning for their city regions. As the UK recovers from the pandemic and adapts to the effects of Brexit, local labour markets are expected to change significantly. In particular, there is emerging evidence of a rise in emigration of non-UK born people over the course of the pandemic (Portes 2021). Combined with the new restrictions in place on EU migration as a result of the end of freedom of movement, there is a risk that an increase in skills shortages could hold back the economic recovery (Morris 2020b).

This means that it will be especially important for city regions to make the most of the talents of migrants currently living and working locally. Non-UK workers are more likely to be overqualified for their jobs than their UK counterparts (ONS 2017). IPPR's previous research has found that addressing skills under-utilisation among migrant workers could significantly boost economic output (Morris and Hochlaf 2019).

Mayors should therefore consider including efforts to foster and develop the talents and skills of migrants as an important part of their regional economic planning – drawing together existing work on economic regeneration with new opportunities for skills investment (such as the Shared Prosperity Fund, discussed further below). By developing a broader strategy for supporting migrants' labour market outcomes, this would help to both tackle economic exclusion and unlock regional growth.

- **Prioritising integration in the future Shared Prosperity Fund**

The government is replacing EU structural funds with its own UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which is to be launched in 2022 (HCL 2021). EU funding has played an important role in supporting integration in the UK, particularly in relation to helping the social inclusion of more vulnerable and marginalised groups, such as Roma communities. Where city region mayors are able to play a role in shaping these funding opportunities, there could be scope to help direct funding towards integration activities.

In the immediate term, the government has announced a £220m UK Community Renewal Fund for 2021-22, in advance of the new Shared Prosperity Fund which will begin in the following year (MHCLG 2021). The lead authorities for this fund in England include mayoral combined authorities (where they exist) and the Greater London Authority. They are responsible for inviting bids from applicants and developing a shortlist of projects for the UK government. Investment priorities include a number of areas highly relevant to integration – such as investment in skills (eg upskilling workers), investment in communities and place (eg supporting culture-led regeneration and community development), and supporting people into employment (eg through addressing labour market barriers and providing ESOL training) (ibid).

City region mayors could therefore use their role as lead authorities to encourage local delivery partners to come forward with projects on supporting integration. In particular, they could seek to encourage projects on promoting economic opportunities for migrant communities through the fund’s investment priorities on skills and employment support.

- **Tackling the economic exclusion of vulnerable migrant groups as part of regional homelessness strategies**

A number of mayors have prioritised addressing homelessness in their city regions. Metro mayor Andy Burnham has committed to ending rough sleeping in Greater Manchester and has launched a charity focused on supporting the most vulnerable (Greater Manchester Mayor’s Charity 2021). The charity contributes to Greater Manchester’s ‘A Bed Every Night’ scheme, which provides emergency accommodation to people across the city region, including those with no recourse to public funds (GMCA 2020a; GMCA 2020b). The mayor and local leaders have recently published a joint statement to the Home Office calling for an end to the hostile environment and a cross-departmental review of the NRPF policy (GMCA 2020b).

In the West Midlands, metro mayor Andy Street has created a Homelessness Task Force focused on “designing out homelessness in the West Midlands” (WMCA 2021). For the past three years, the combined authority and the task force have worked with local authorities to develop a West Midlands winter plan for rough sleepers, including a commitment to support people with no recourse to public funds (WMCA 2020a). Earlier in the pandemic, the task force called for a 12 month ‘grace’ period for people with NRPF and asked the government to provide funding to support those affected into employment or to help them resolve their immigration status (WMCA 2020b).

City region mayors could build on the work done during the pandemic to incorporate supporting vulnerable migrant groups into their future homelessness strategies. This could involve working with local authorities to identify common challenges for migrant groups across the region; targeting homelessness funding where available to support individuals to resolve their immigration status; and coordinating immigration advice across the region. Of particular importance is the need to collaborate with other funders to explore longer-term solutions for gaps in immigration advice, given evidence that many parts of the UK are currently immigration advice 'deserts' (areas without legal aid providers) or 'droughts' (areas where providers exist but in practice have limited capacity to accept new cases) (Wilding 2019).

City region mayors could also lead on issuing a joint call to government for the reform of policies such as 'no recourse to public funds', in light of an expected rise in destitution due to the pandemic and the winding down of national support schemes. A joint statement by city region mayors across England on NRPF could send a powerful signal to the Home Office about the implications of the policy at the local level.

3. Creating sanctuary city regions

Migrants can often face barriers to integration as a result of their immigration status. As IPPR's previous research on the hostile environment has highlighted, there is evidence that a number of public services – including the police, the NHS, and social services – have shared information on the immigration status of individuals with the Home Office for immigration enforcement purposes. This can deter people with insecure immigration status from accessing public services, encouraging them to avoid seeking healthcare and reporting crimes (Qureshi et al 2020; Morris 2020c). Ultimately, this approach to immigration enforcement risks marginalising recent migrant communities and inhibiting their integration.

City region mayors have limited powers over immigration policy and, while they can support the provision of legal advice, they cannot resolve individuals' statuses without involvement from central government. However, they can play a role in promoting 'sanctuary city' approaches to immigration within their city regions. This is an idea which derives from the 'sanctuary city' movement in the US, where localities have imposed limits on police cooperation with federal authorities with respect to the enforcement of immigration rules (Delvino 2019).

While city region mayors in the UK have fewer direct powers over local officials, they have taken some steps to limit cooperation with the Home Office for

immigration enforcement purposes. For instance, the London and Greater Manchester mayors have said that they will refuse to cooperate with the Home Office on its policy on including rough sleeping as grounds for refusing or cancelling leave to remain in the UK (Barker 2020).

Drawing on this approach, there are further steps which mayors can take to create a welcoming environment for newcomers in their city region, regardless of their immigration status. Possible options include:

- **Committing to limit cooperation with the Home Office for immigration enforcement purposes**

City region mayors could send a signal to other institutions by refusing to cooperate with the Home Office for immigration enforcement purposes, unless there is a statutory requirement to do so or it is done with the individual's consent. This could encourage local authorities in their jurisdictions to do the same (including refusing to cooperate on immigration enforcement with their social services departments or homelessness outreach teams). Mayors could also include similar conditions on data-sharing and cooperation when providing funding to local homelessness organisations and other support services.

If an approach based on refusing to cooperate is not possible, then mayors should at a minimum conduct an audit of existing arrangements to determine on what basis any data-sharing with the Home Office is taking place. This would help to address any ambiguities or 'grey areas' which could lead to discretionary sharing by officials.

- **Where they have powers over policing, including 'safe reporting' as a strategic priority in their police and crime plans**

Evidence from freedom of information requests in 2018 revealed that the majority of police forces in the UK had referred victims and witnesses on to Immigration Enforcement (Nye et al 2018). In response to a super-complaint on these practices by Liberty and Southall Black Sisters, a joint investigation by HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary, the College of Policing, and the Independent Office for Police Conduct found that they were causing "significant harm" to the public interest. The report based this conclusion on the finding that individuals with insecure status were afraid that their data may be shared with Immigration Enforcement if they came forward to the police (HMICFRS et al 2020).

While most city region mayors do not have any control over their police forces, in London and Greater Manchester the mayors have powers equivalent to PCCs (police and crime commissioners). This means that, although their police forces still have operational independence, the mayors can encourage them to review their practices by highlighting safe reporting mechanisms as a strategic priority in their police and crime plans (see Morris 2020c for further details).

- **Supporting 'safe surgery' initiatives to help migrants with insecure status gain access to GPs and improve vaccine uptake**

Research by Doctors of the World has found that migrants are in many cases refused from registering with their local GP due to lack of paperwork, despite the fact they are fully eligible for primary care. For instance, GPs may require formal proof of address and identification as part of the registration process, suggesting a poor interpretation of NHS guidance (DOTW 2019).

As the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccines continue, it is vital for public health that as much of the population as possible is registered with a GP so they can be immunised. City region mayors could play an important role in bringing down healthcare barriers for migrants by promoting 'safe surgeries' initiatives – through, for instance, working with local directors of public health to encourage GPs to register undocumented migrants and to offer translations of government guidance to patients who do not speak English (see DOTW 2020 for more details on 'safe surgeries'). Creating a broader 'sanctuary city' narrative across the city region focused on encouraging fair access to services and preventing data-sharing could also help to build trust with communities and improve vaccine uptake.

CONCLUSION

This briefing has outlined some of the steps city region mayors can take to promote integration as their communities recover from the pandemic. While much responsibility for migration and integration policy still lies with central government, there are nonetheless a range of levers which mayors have at their disposal to secure change. We have focused in particular on improving English language provision, tackling economic exclusion, and offering accessible services for those with insecure immigration status.

Even where city region mayors do not have direct powers or budgets to enact change, they can still play a vital role in promoting the integration agenda. Mayors can use their leadership roles to conduct region-wide strategic planning,

convene partners from across the constituent local authorities, and send a message to central government about the experiences of integration at the local level.

As the briefing has highlighted, many mayors are already exploring innovative approaches using their new powers and platforms to promote integration in their city regions. As the UK begins its social and economic recovery, mayors now have the opportunity to build on their work to bring down barriers to integration and strengthen community relations.

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