

Research shows what is lost when refugees have to leave a neighborhood

February 17 2023, by Malte Gembus and Tamlyn Monson



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Just over a year after fleeing the Taliban and seeking asylum in the UK, more than 150 Afghan refugees, including children, are facing more upheaval. In a matter of weeks, the Home Office has given dozens of refugee and asylum seeker families short notice that they will be moved from their accommodation in London to hotels in [Yorkshire](#) and

[Bedfordshire](#), hundreds of miles away.

Many new arrivals find themselves moved to different areas, often where accommodation is cheaper. This involves taking (often vulnerable) people far away from the neighborhood where they have begun settling in, and where they have started in [local schools](#) and jobs. Our research in the London boroughs of [Newham](#) and [Barking & Dagenham](#) illustrates how important these point-of-arrival communities are to refugees—and what is at stake when people are made to leave.

Our work involves speaking to newcomers, learning about their experiences since arrival, spending time in local places that feature in their lives, and working alongside people that provide services and support.

The resources, opportunities and support structures people use to get orientated in a new community make up what we call "arrival infrastructure." This involves interactions with people, from paid service providers to friends, colleagues and strangers on the street. It happens in parks, markets, barbershops, libraries, community centers, schools and shared accommodation.

New migrants invest a lot of labor and energy in becoming accustomed to new surroundings, getting to know a new neighborhood, working out how to access local services, schools and GPs, and building relationships in the community. Even more emotional and physical effort is needed to secure a job. For many, this depends on establishing relationships with the right people first.

Changing places

Schools, community centers, and places of worship; friends, co-tenants and colleagues; even the local off-license—all of these are key parts of

arrival infrastructure. They can't be packed up and moved to a different locality.

The decline in [affordable housing](#) and council accommodation in the UK has created dilemmas for local councils and the Home Office when it comes to housing vulnerable residents. Yet authorities need to weigh the financial gains of moving families against the losses to vulnerable people who are forced to abandon the lives they have built and go somewhere else.



This mural, painted by a local resident in Barking & Dagenham, shows how the community has welcomed and supported newcomers. Credit: Tamlyn Monson

A Home Office spokesperson told The Conversation: "While hotels do not provide a long-term solution, they do offer safe, secure and clean accommodation. We will continue to bring down the number of people in bridging hotels, moving people into more sustainable accommodation as quickly as possible.

"Occasionally families may be moved from a hotel scheduled for closure to another hotel. In these instances, families are given appropriate notice of a move and are supported by their local authority every step of the way."

We know from our research that access to support varies from place to place. One ex-asylum seeker we spoke to easily accessed a GP in her Dagenham neighborhood. But she struggled to get healthcare in other areas, where local surgeries insisted on proof of address that she was unable to provide while in Home Office accommodation. Although NHS policy does not require documentary proof of address, some surgeries insist on it. [Healthwatch](#) has found this to be a common barrier preventing people from registering with a GP.

We also know that schools and workplaces can be crucial in settling in—and not purely because they offer an education or a salary. Among new arrivals in Barking, work often provides opportunities for friendships, knowledge-sharing and improving English language skills.

Schools as arrival hubs

Our research shows how important schools are in helping newly arrived families settle in. Some schools become real "arrival hubs" in their local area where staff fulfill a variety of roles going way beyond education. They help newly arrived families navigate complex bureaucratic processes and make [social connections](#) in the neighborhood. Perhaps most importantly, they provide [emotional support](#) in times that can be

uncertain and distressing.

As Soofia Amin, assistant head teacher at Kensington Primary School in East Ham, told us: "We strive to be there as a constant support with our doors always open, this is what helps our newly arrived families. We are the safe space when they first arrive."

One woman we spoke to, Daniela (not her real name), is a mother and volunteer at a primary [school](#) in the London borough of Newham. After several years in the borough, Daniela now feels confident about how to find help and participate in local life.

"Now I can say that with any problem I have, I know where to go. Maybe it's because I have been here for longer and I grow a little bit to understand where to go in the neighborhood. And really, we have a lot of support here. Anything you need—you can go to school; you can do anything."

Daniela and Soofia remind us of the value of a neighborhood in helping new arrivals solve problems, access services and get involved in local life. In this sense, the costs for refugees being moved away from their jobs and schools goes deeper than the obvious impacts to their education and income. Their well-being, social inclusion, participation and sense of belonging are all at risk.

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