

# Reassessing Asylum-Seeker Dispersal in the UK: A Local Case Study

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## **Abstract**

The national dispersal policy within the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act (IAA) is, arguably, the most radical measure in UK legislation affecting asylum-seekers in the last fifty years. With evidence from studies that highlighted the failings of other dispersal programs, and driven by distaste for the practice of forcing people to live in particular places, critics were quick to condemn the policy. It was, so many arguments went, an attempt at social engineering that went too far. Research on the early stages of the dispersal program confirmed such views. However, such research was undertaken at a time when the new structures of implementation were in the process of being established at breakneck speed. And we can now ask, to what extent were these failings merely transitional? This article is based on two ethnographic studies of the experiences of dispersal among asylum-seekers in the city of Hull, in the Yorkshire and Humberside region. The first was carried out in the summer of 2000 during a crucial 'bedding-in' period of the policy. The second was carried out in the summer of 2006 at a time when implementation of the policy was well established. It addresses this question of whether or not the failings were merely transitional by using asylum-seeker 'drift', the extent to which asylum-seekers are prepared to abandon their dispersal sites and move to sites of their choosing, as an indication of asylum-seeker welfare. I point to three key factors underlying incidence of drift: social networks, social tensions, and more formal kinds of asylum-seeker support system. I conclude that while there have been significant transformations in each of these and while drift has receded, the national dispersal policy still constitutes an act of social engineering too far.

**Key words:** asylum-seekers; dispersal policy; United Kingdom

## **Introduction**

The national dispersal policy within the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act (IAA) is, arguably, the most radical measure in UK legislation affecting asylum-seekers in the last fifty years. Typically, asylum-seekers have tended to settle in a narrow range of locations, especially London. Wrought, by and large, by a desire to reduce strain on health, housing, educational and other services in those areas, the policy was intended

to encourage asylum-seeker settlement in areas of lesser such strain. The central means of achieving this has been the linking of rights to access such services to resettlement. With evidence from studies that highlighted the failings of other dispersal programs, and driven by distaste for the practice of forcing people to live in particular places, critics were quick to condemn the policy. It was, so many arguments went, an attempt at social engineering that went too far (Dawson, 2001). Research on the early stages of the dispersal program confirmed such views. It failed in terms of each of its three central aims: burden sharing (Boswell, 2001), control and deterrence (Boswell, 2001) and, most importantly, in terms of ensuring the welfare of asylum-seekers (Audit Commission, 2000; Fekete, 2000; Kelly, 2000; Dawson, 2001). However, such research was undertaken at a time when the new structures of implementation were in the process of “being established at breakneck speed” (Kelly, 2000, p. 40). And we can now ask, to what extent were these failings merely transitional? This article is based on two ethnographic studies of the experiences of dispersal among asylum-seekers in the city of Hull. The first was carried out in the summer of 2000 during a crucial ‘bedding-in’ period of the policy. The second was carried out in the summer of 2006 at a time when implementation of the policy was well established (1). It addresses this question of whether or not the failings were merely transitional by using asylum-seeker ‘drift’, the extent to which asylum-seekers, no doubt induced by economic and social opportunities, are prepared to abandon their dispersal sites and move to sites of their choosing, as an indication of asylum-seeker welfare.

## **Methodology and data**

Both studies were intrinsically ethnographic in nature, deploying a range of qualitative techniques, including focus groups, semi-structured interviews and participant observation, according to their interpersonal and contextual appropriateness. Research was carried out amongst long-term local residents, staff from government, NGO and private asylum-seeker service providers and, of course, asylum-seekers themselves. One of the central values of ethnographic research is its illuminating in full qualitative complexity the views, in this case on asylum-seeker dispersal, of the various research subjects. There is not the space to present this here, and this is being developed for a forthcoming monograph. Rather, echoing another value of ethnography, I present a series of growing trends in the experiencing of asylum-seeker dispersal that are identified by such agents.

### **Policy rationale and implementation**

In addition to ensuring the welfare of asylum-seekers the national dispersal policy was framed by the aim of burden sharing, the redistribution of costs of reception and the reduction of tensions in areas in which asylum-seekers would otherwise normally settle. Above all, the policy was intended to relieve pressure on local authorities (that have a statutory requirement to provide accommodation and education) in London and the South East of England. More contentiously, it has been argued, it was also designed as a form of control and deterrence, against the making of 'abusive' asylum claims, for example (Boswell, 2001). The National Asylum Seeker Support Service (NASS), a division of the Home Office, was charged with implementing and managing the dispersal programme at the national level. Regional Asylum Consortia (RAC), loose partnerships of local authority, voluntary and private providers, were charged with its management in the dispersal areas. In theory asylum-seekers were to

be dispersed to 'cluster areas', contexts where there were existing ethnic communities, where there was "potential to construct a sound base for the support of asylum-seekers" (IAA explanatory notes, 1999), and where there were sufficient supplies of suitable accommodation. Broadly speaking, there were three common types of dispersal: dispersal carried out under contract between NASS and local authorities, between NASS and private accommodation providers, and between the local authorities at points of origin and private accommodation providers at sites of dispersal. Most asylum-seekers incorporated in the program, largely from Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo and Albania (Mukolo, 2000) and, more recently, the Horn of Africa, were sent to the Midlands, Scotland, the North West and North East, and Yorkshire and Humberside, including its principal city, Hull. And this pattern has persisted.

Hull's demography, the reasons for its inclusion in the dispersal program and the history of its inclusion in the program are fairly typical of many other dispersal sites in the UK. It is relatively economically depressed and 'monocultural', without any significant recent history of immigration. Asylum-seekers began arriving in late 1999, prior to the formal inception of the dispersal program in early 2000. Some came as part of the Kosovo refugee relief program and then significant numbers came when Kent, a relatively over burdened local authority in South East England, signed a contract with private landlords in Hull to provide accommodation for between 300-400 asylum-seekers. Later, in September 2000, the local authority set up its own contract for dispersal within NASS. Following these beginnings, throughout the 2000s Hull has received one of the largest numbers of asylum-seekers amongst cities in the UK, anecdotally estimated as averaging 1,200 arrivals per annum (Craig, Dawson,

Hutton, Roberts and Wilkinson, 2004, p. 12). The main reason for Hull's participation in the program has been its accommodation surplus.

In an earlier research report I argued that the likelihood of dispersal working in contexts such as Hull was remote (Dawson, 2001). As a relatively economically depressed area it offers few economic opportunities, nor the reasonable possibility of employment either within the formal or informal sectors. As a relatively monocultural area it is beset by a number of problems. The possibility of asylum-seekers establishing significant networks of extended family, friends and religious, ethnic and national groups is limited. The potential for social tensions, and in particular racial tension to emerge through dispersal is high. And the institutionalised structures of support tailored to the needs of asylum-seekers were relatively rudimentary. These problems frame my analysis.

One possible measure of the continued efficacy of this argument and, more generally, of the quality of welfare dispersed asylum-seekers experience is, I would argue, the level of 'drift'. Drift is a term commonly used and shared by governmental, non-governmental and private sector providers in the field of asylum-seeker welfare. Simply, it refers to the practice amongst many asylum-seekers to move on from, rather than to settle into the contexts to where they are dispersed. Both in practice and in the minimal research on the issue (see, for example, Audit Commission 2000) it is ill-defined. For example, there is no agreement on the length of time between being dispersed to moving on that ought to qualify or not as a case of drift. Rather, by the time of our follow-up study in 2006 it had solidified into a qualitative category, defined as temporary inhabitation in the dispersal site without, regardless of the length of the stay, the dispersed person having shown signs of intending to settle permanently. Typically, signs include seeking permanent employment and the

development of inter-cultural social networks. Of those who fall within this category, the greatest number leave in the very earliest weeks after dispersal, sacrificing welfare benefits in exchange for lives sustained by employment elsewhere or support from friends and family elsewhere. Also, a small proportion of those who leave maintain the pretence of staying, in order to retain such benefits, moving regularly between the dispersed site and their new home. Their engagement with the dispersal site is one of utility rather than settlement. The emergence of this trend stands, it should be pointed out, in sharp relief to historic patterns of settlement and mobility in the city of Hull. A relatively geographically isolated context, and a post-industrial city characterized by low levels of education and skill transferability, it is marked by a heightened ideology of localism and a remarkably immobile population. In contrast, we observe, patterns of asylum-seeker dispersal and drift are rendering Hull as, to use Clifford's celebrated terms, a context as much of 'travelling' as of 'dwelling' (1992).

As implied the disincentive for drift is considerable, including, at very least, the loss of accommodation rights. However, in Hull, as in many other contexts affected by this (Geddes, 2000) or other dispersal programs (White et al, 1987; Kushner and Knox, 1999; Zetter and Pearl, 2000) the extent of drift was initially considerable. Most of the asylum-seekers we initially spoke to regarded their stay in the city as one on route to other cities such as London, and, far from maintaining or forming an attachment to place, many of them developed a more mobile conceptualisation of 'home' (Rapport and Dawson 1998). Indeed, of the separated minors who arrived in the early stages of the dispersal program (those who one might regard as least able to move on) social services estimated that up to one third disappeared (Dawson and Holding, 2001). Having said this, our most recent ethnographic evidence suggests that through time the extent of drift has receded. This mirrors evidence from other similarly

economically depressed and monocultural dispersal sites. For example, research carried out in Glasgow indicated that even in the very earliest stages of the dispersal program, after initial widespread reluctance approximately 70% of asylum-seekers went on to remain in the city (Audit Commission, 2000).

**Social networks:** Networks of extended family, friends and religious, ethnic or national groups are central sources of psychological, social, economic, and practical support for asylum-seekers. The policy aim of building such networks is implicit in the idea of cluster areas. However, the commitment to clustering has not been evenly practiced by NASS, local authorities and private providers. Some RAC have tried to cluster. Indeed, driven by its constituent local authorities, Yorkshire and Humberside RAC attempts to accommodate people in the same language or ethnic groups. Such attempts are, however, undermined when dispersal is carried out under contract between NASS and private accommodation providers, and between local authorities at points of origin and private accommodation providers at sites of dispersal. In these circumstances dispersal has tended to take place in an unplanned fashion according to the availability of cheap accommodation. This may explain the recession of drift in Hull. Since September 2000, when the local authority set up its own contract with NASS, greater attention has been paid to clustering. Dispersed asylum-seekers and long-term residents we have spoken to throughout the 2000s talked of a growing perception and reality of emerging and establishing ethnic communities. And in many cases, the vitality of these communities is identified as a reason for remaining in the city.

**Social tension:** Initial implementation of the dispersal program was, by and large, disorderly, authoritarian, involving minimal consultation with local communities in dispersal sites and seriously under-resourced (Fekete, 2000). Moreover, most of these sites were “poor areas where health and social services are already stretched beyond their limits” (Kelly, 2000, p 42). These factors led to widespread fears that dispersal would exacerbate social tensions. In particular it was widely felt that the dispersal program would create, especially in places such as Hull that have a very limited recent history of immigration, “the conditions in which racism and xenophobia thrive” (Kelly, 2000, p 42). These fears were realized in 2000 when the program was temporarily suspended in large parts of the North of England in 2000, not including Hull, largely because of a marked rise in the incidence of violent crimes against asylum-seekers. Moreover, despite resumption of the program, the problem persisted. Indeed, it has been argued, the problem has been so severe, that government persistence with the dispersal program has required it to suppress research on the issue of violence against dispersed asylum-seekers (see, for example, Morris, 2007).

The situation in Hull initially confirmed many of these fears, although often in unexpected ways. Not unexpectedly, the research highlights discourses that are both supportive and critical of asylum-seekers. In many cases these are given empirical sustenance by the outcome of political measures. Most obviously, the viability of the commonplace and menacing image of groups of ‘dark’ young men loitering en masse has been facilitated by the fact that it is largely young male asylum-seekers that have been dispersed to the city. Some initial policy-related causes of loitering have now been removed. For example, in the early stages of dispersal asylum-seekers were only able to obtain provisions through vouchers that could only be spent in a limited range of retail outlets. This, inevitably, made for congregation. The voucher system was

abolished and replaced by a cash system in 2003. However, other causes of loitering have persisted. Notably, asylum-seekers are forced to congregate as a result of continuing limited access to employment, education and leisure facilities - they have little to do but 'hang around'. On top of this the level of racially motivated violence against asylum-seekers increased exponentially during the early years of dispersal. Local police figures revealed that on average one racially motivated incident was reported every day in 2000 (Regan, 2000). Our most recent research suggests a progressive worsening of this situation, with, in 2006, no less than one in four asylum-seekers we interviewed reporting being victims of serious violence.

Having said this, these findings must be qualified. First, throughout the dispersal era the local press has run a laudable campaign highlighting asylum-seeker issues that included the scrupulous reporting of instances of violence perpetrated against them. Second, the police figures and reportage do not fully reveal what percentage of this violence takes place within the asylum-seeker population itself. While almost all of the asylum-seekers we spoke to throughout the 2000s reported feeling marginalised within the context of the local community, many also claimed that the bulk of the violence they faced was perpetrated by other asylum-seekers. Such violence was often characterised as of a form typical between young men, typical among peoples who in many cases have come from contexts of brutality, and/or an inevitable result of the asylum-seeker experience. On the one hand, it can be an emotionally charged experience, involving variously feelings of relief, guilt about those who have been left behind, uncertainty about the future, trauma, senses of dislocation and culture shock (Cahndapo and Egharevba, 2000). On the other hand, it is characterised usually by unrelenting boredom. Most commonly, however, such violence was reported as being racially motivated or, at least, as having inter-ethnic/national roots. Importantly also,

it is often claimed, conflict of this nature is institutionalised. The case of the ‘Kosovans’, in reality Albanians from Albania and Macedonia as well as Kosovars, is instructive in this respect. Although a comparatively small group, they are widely regarded by asylum-seekers and long-term residents alike as one of the most visible and established ethnic/national communities. The reason for this probably relates to a consciousness of them borne of recent geo-political events and of length of their stay in the city. Kosovans, or more correctly Albanians, were, initially, temporarily, dispersed to the city in 1999 during the war in Kosovo and prior to the national dispersal policy and current dispersal program. Others have followed during the program. This has provided the basis for a very common and apparently mythical narrative among the locally based asylum-seekers, the essence of which is that Kosovans have infiltrated local asylum-seeker services and established a system of ethnic/national clientalism. The alleged results of this are that the Kosovans often enjoy the benefits of better accommodation, misappropriated vouchers and so on.

Finally, while not wishing to underestimate the seriousness of the racially motivated violence or inter-ethnic/national violence and conflict that takes place in Hull, it is also clear that asylum-seekers’ narratives of such violence and conflict form a vital strand of what we have described elsewhere as an understandable, but nevertheless “strategic discourse of litanies” that undermines perceptions of Hull as an inappropriate site for the resettlement of asylum seekers (Dawson, 2001, p 1). Alarming, in this respect the research points to congruence between asylum-seekers, radical advocates for asylum-seeker support and, ironically, the local racist agenda. All, in a sense, argue the case for keeping asylum-seekers out! For the purposes of this article it is necessary to point out that the discourse has been, and continues to be,

utilised by many asylum-seekers to pressurise for redispersal and thus continues to bolster the level of asylum-seeker drift.

**Support systems:** As with much of the other research on the other dispersal sites our work highlights often fundamental inadequacies in terms of the provision of accommodation services, healthcare (and particularly mental healthcare), education, language support, leisure services and, above all, legal support (see also, Dawson and Holding, 20001). While not all such inadequacies are rooted at the local level, we would argue that in many cases places such as Hull that lack significant recent histories of immigration were, at the outset of dispersal, particularly debilitated. Nonetheless, it was reasonable to expect this situation to improve. In fact, what our research in 2006 demonstrates is that the comparatively rudimentary quality of asylum-seeker support systems we encountered in 2000 has not appreciably improved. In other words, old practices die hard and new ones take a long time to gestate. Substandard, sparse and/or poorly disseminated information, inadequate attention to diverse cultures and needs, and pervasive cultures of authority and deference within constituent parts of the RAC continue to militate against asylum-seekers claiming effectively their rights and entitlements (see also Fanning, 2000).

Likewise, new institutional structures have taken an inordinately long time to take shape. Crucially despite regular 'inter-agency' meetings, poor channels of communication within the RAC and between different departments within the local authority have led to considerable uncertainty concerning responsibility for asylum-seeker affairs. One debilitating result of this is that work tends to become concentrated at the levels of the first point of contact with asylum-seekers. Most

obviously, for example, school teachers find themselves dealing with a range of asylum-seeker children's needs, an area in which they lack expertise and resources.

Finally, the evolution of appropriate institutional structures continues to be frustrated by debilitating political struggle. Our research demonstrates a marked contrast in the quality of care offered by local authority and private providers. Most of the instances of 'bad practice' we identify, including intimidation of asylum-seekers, various forms of institutionalised racism and, generally, substandard provisioning, are perpetuated by the private providers. The situation is sufficiently severe to describe the difference between asylum-seekers whose provisioning is not 'contracted out' and those whose is 'contracted out' as that between second and third class citizens. Aware of this situation, the local authority, no doubt like many others throughout the UK, is forced, within the context of the RAC, to spend valuable time and resources in trying, with few formal mechanisms of enforcement and usually through cajoling and critique, to regulate the services of private providers.

The depressing reality of the still relatively rudimentary systems of provision is one key factor underpinning the continuity, albeit diminished, of asylum-seeker drift. Most of the key services for asylum-seekers are concentrated in other parts of the country, and in London in particular. For example, no less than half of the immigration law firms contracted by the Legal Services Commission are located in London (Zetter and Pearl, 2000). Of course, given the concentration of asylum-seekers in London, such services are massively over subscribed. However, this reality does not seem to have reached many of the dispersed asylum-seekers. London is still regarded by many as something of an asylum-seeker nirvana and that image appears unlikely to change.

## **Conclusion**

Given the moderate recession of drift in asylum-seeker dispersal sites such as Hull it might appear that many of the problems of the national dispersal policy and its implementation were merely transitional, and that dispersed asylum-seekers would increasingly enjoy a higher quality of welfare in the dispersal sites. In fact, progress has been pathetically slow, and a great deal of work still needs to be done. Beyond the obvious need for greater resourcing of the dispersal program, there are a number of structural issues that NASS must still address. It must consider abandoning any practices that intensify processes of asylum-seeker stigmatisation, marginalisation and, ultimately the construction of racist imagery. The abolition of vouchers was a move in the right direction, but not nearly enough. NASS must also pursue more concerted a clustering program of dispersal that enables the construction of networks of extended family, friends and religious, ethnic or national groups among asylum-seekers. From this basis of security, links with the wider community are more likely to be forged. Finally, NASS must also deal effectively with the role of private providers. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that perpetuation of bad practice by some private providers demonstrates a fundamental incompatibility between the provision of effective asylum-seeker services and the profit motive and that, therefore, the practice of contracting out should end. At the very least, I would argue that private providers ought to play a smaller role. Moreover, their performance should be regulated more effectively. Under the auspices of RAC, local authorities might be best placed to perform this function and they should be given the powers of enforcement to do so. Having said this, making dispersal work in places such as Hull that are relatively economically depressed and have limited recent history of refugee settlement would require more than mere increased resources and structural changes

in the delivery of support. It should be clear from our findings that asylum-seekers themselves are key agents in the making and breaking of the dispersal program and, by and large, many of them continue to vote with their feet and actively seek out other contexts that offer considerably greater economic and social opportunities. As it was in 2000, still today the national dispersal program is an act of social engineering too far.

### Notes:

1. This paper represents an updating of a paper published in 2002 (Dawson, 2002) concerning the bedding in of the dispersal program. Our research in 2006 concluded that many of the fundamental problems in the program we identified in 2002 still persist.

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