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Resettlement, Austerity and Vulnerability: A Critical Examination of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme in the North East of England

Georgia Dimitriou

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
School of Government and International Affairs, Durham university

2025

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a global move from states to have resettlement perceived as the only remedy to forced displacement. A growing number of resettlement schemes have materialized in destination countries of the Global North in recent years, whilst at the same time asylum protection is increasingly restricted amid rising far right anti-immigrant rhetoric.

The United Kingdom has been at the forefront of this trend with the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS). Focusing on this scheme, this thesis explores the relationship between resettlement, austerity and the concept of vulnerability in the enactment of the VPRS in the North East of England. It shows how the term ‘vulnerability’ has been embedded into the legal categorisation of refugee resettlement, becoming an integral part to the conceptual separation between individuals worthy of protection and those who are not. It also argues that in the context of resettlement schemes such as the VPRS, individuals placed in areas hit hardest by government austerity measures, such as the North East of England, adopt a neoliberal subjectivity whereby individuals become entrepreneurial and compete with themselves and with others to do better, ultimately with the eventual goal of citizenship. In developing its analysis, the thesis also illustrates the methodological point that when conducting research with groups of people framed as ‘vulnerable’ in normative ethical review processes and institutional frameworks, it is vital that researchers are attuned to the need to develop situated judgments of ethical practice and responsibility in situ.

Ultimately, the thesis shows how specific understandings of vulnerability shape resettlement policy, its experience, and the ways in which it is researched. It argues that while these understandings are often at odds, they also intersect in shaping how the VPRS materialises on the ground.

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List of acronyms

DAR-Darlington Assistance for Refugees

EITC- Earned Income Tax Credit

ESOL- English for Speakers of Other Languages

FODI-Friends of the Drop In

ILR- Indefinite Leave to Remain

JET- Jobs, Education, Training

NECAT-North East churches Acting Together

NEMP- North East Migration Partnership

NERS- North of England Refugee Service

N.E.S.T- North East Solidarity and Teaching

RCOs- Refugee-led Community Organisations

RRF-Regional Refugee Forum North East

UK-United Kingdom

UNHCR- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

VAF- Vulnerability Assessment framework

VCS- Voluntary and Community Sector

VPRS-Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme

WASH- Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

WERS- West End refugee Service

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Chapter 1- Introduction

It's September 2023 and I find myself in the Gala Theatre, in one of Durham City's last remaining council owned social spaces, watching the film, 'The Old Oak'. I am using its £5 cinema tickets which I suspect they introduced to stay open after an independent cinema launched in the city a few years before.

The story of the film is raw and simple. A bus full of Syrian refugee families arrive to settle within a stagnant ex-mining village in the North East of England. The locals are curious but also frustrated at the arrival of these foreigners, shouting to the support workers accompanying them: 'it's not fair'; 'why didn't you tell us these were coming?'. Yara, is one of the young Syrian refugees who arrives in the village on that bus with her mother and younger siblings. She is taking photos with a camera, given to her by her father before they lose touch with him during the Syrian conflict, now not knowing if he is alive or dead. In the next scene, TJ Ballantyne, the landlord of the Old Oak, tries to straighten the name on the front of his pub with a mop handle as the sign keeps dropping. Isolated, with mental health issues and financial problems, TJ is struggling to maintain the last public space the community in the village has left to socialise in.

What an irony, I think to myself. To watch this whilst in the Gala Theatre, a public space that is also struggling to remain open.

I focus back onto the film. It's a few days later. Tensions between the newly arrived refugees and the local community arise. The locals do not understand why these foreigners are offered things. They complain, saying that 'charity begins at home', whilst shaking their heads at the support workers who deliver the things for the refugees. Tensions peak because TJ reopens a room at the side of the pub that was locked up for years after mines started shutting down

nationwide in the 1980s. Yara and a support worker feel that both locals and refugees in the village are isolated. They propose that the families who need it the most start eating together in that last remaining public space to get to know each other and hopefully become friends. They remind TJ his mother's words to him: 'you eat together, you stick together'. Meanwhile, the pub regulars who had already asked TJ to reopen the room for them to hold a meeting to discuss the refugee situation in the village and he had refused, are consumed by an overwhelming sense of injustice. They sabotage the public kitchen, and it closes.

I sidetrack again. I remember the story a participant shared with me taking place at the public library opposite the Gala Theatre. An English language teacher had taken her newly arrived adult students to the library to show them how to use it. A local, disturbed by the visit, shouted in a loud North Eastern accent 'what are they doing 'ere? Go 'ome!'. The teacher explained that the local authority is paid by the government to care for these people because they were in a war in Syria. The man then said acceptingly, 'but why is nobody told us?! That's alright then'.

The film ends. We are not told whether the village manages to reopen the public kitchen. Another austerity-stricken place in the North East of England, whose possibility of reopening is left pending, waiting for a solution that never comes. The refugees are, finally, united with the locals in a march of solidarity at the Miner's Gala. I leave the theatre (named after this annual event) hoping that my £5 will help it open.

The relationship between refugee resettlement, austerity and the concept of vulnerability in the North East of England as depicted in 'The Old Oak' is a complex one and sits at the heart of this thesis. In the late nineteenth century, the North East was a highly attractive centre to migrants, due to its shipbuilding and coal mining. However, the deindustrialisation of the mid 20th century and the neoliberal policies adopted by the UK government at the time, caused a

decline in the economic dynamics of the region, with the end of the century shrinking the ship industry to a minimum and ceasing all coal mining (Flug and Hussein, 2019). Between 1984 and 1997, there were 170,000 jobs lost from the closure of the mines, representing a quarter of the total male employment in the affected areas (Riva et al, 2011). Many of these areas were like the village depicted in the film. It is in such areas that refugee resettlement policies have steered the refugees fleeing the conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria in a bid to redress divestment and reinvigorate the North East. And it is in the intersection of these policies that refugee populations have been asked to make new homes amid ambivalent reactions of welcome and resentment.

In fact, just as these conflicts were developing, conditions worsened with the global financial crisis of 2007- 2008 when the Brown administration introduced its first austerity measures (Bond, 2009; Brennel et al, 2010). The measures became even stricter with David Cameron's austerity programme in 2010, who aimed to guide the UK through a new 'age of austerity' (Summers, 2009). Amongst the cuts made was governmental funding to local authorities which throughout the austerity programme period was reduced by 49.1%. The Private Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that the most severe governmental cuts were experienced by local authorities who depended on this funding the most (National Audit Office, 2018; Smith et al, 2016). In recent years the North East has seen a drastic increase in food banks, pressuring further already strained local authority budgets, whilst governmental austerity cuts have also reduced the financial support provided to third sector organisations (Flug and Hussein, 2019). High levels of deprivation in villages like the ones depicted in the film, have been impacting people's physical and mental health for years and initiatives by people living in the area like Yara and TJ's public kitchen are often the only support people who are struggling have access to (Giles et al, 2023).

Despite the levels of deprivation and inequality evident in the region, in 2015 the North East resettled one of the largest proportional refugee populations in the country through the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), a scheme of resettlement introduced by the UK government for individuals fleeing the Syrian conflict, standing in stark contrast to wealthier regions like London or the South East (Watson, 2019; Home Office, 2018; Statista, 2018).

In this thesis I utilise the setting in the North East of England to examine the relationship between refugee resettlement, austerity and the concept of vulnerability. Resettlement schemes like VPRS entail centralised decision-making about where people settle, taking away those choices from individuals. In doing so, they make local authorities, key actors in refugee reception which utilises vulnerability as a resource. In this process, vulnerability is commodified, and as Martin (2020) shows, ‘migrant life is made valuable for extraction’ (p.741), calculating who is ‘vulnerable’ enough and which resources accrue to them due to this vulnerability. The term ‘vulnerability’ is central to this process, as it distinguishes who is supported by the scheme and who is not and is also decisive in determining what forms of support they get. In this thesis, I critically examine what role vulnerability plays in the practice of refugee resettlement, how key actors like local authorities interpret the concept and to what extent austerity affects the experience refugees have of resettlement.

In recent years, there has been a global move from states to have resettlement perceived as the only option for forced displacement. A growing number of resettlement schemes have materialised in destination countries of the Global North whilst asylum protection is increasingly restricted and far right anti-immigrant sentiments are on the rise (Kaida et al, 2021; Lutz and Portmann, 2021). The UK has been at the forefront of this trend with the VPRS, and for this reason it is vital we monitor how this response to forced migration will be developed in its next stages.

Throughout this thesis I address the following overarching research questions to explain the relationship between refugee resettlement, austerity and the concept of vulnerability:

- (1) How is the term ‘vulnerability’ used in the practice of refugee resettlement?
- (2) How is the concept of vulnerability interpreted by the actors that constitute the VPRS in the North East of England?
- (3) How does austerity impact the resettlement of those framed as ‘vulnerable’?

In exploring these questions, I make three main arguments. First, I show that the term ‘vulnerability’ has been embedded into the legal categorisation of refugee resettlement, becoming an integral part to the conceptual separation between individuals worthy of protection and those who are not. Second, I argue that in the context of resettlement schemes such as the VPRS, individuals placed in areas hit hardest by austerity like the North East, are expected to overcome the barriers imposed on them and become independent, settled and able to start new lives as soon as possible. In this conceptual frame, the ‘vulnerable’ refugee will eventually integrate in the host community and become transformed into a citizen. These aspirations point to the espousal of a neoliberal subjectivity whereby the individual is entrepreneurial and constantly competes with oneself and others to do better, all towards an eventual goal of citizenship from which the refugee condition is excluded. My third argument is methodological: I show that when conducting research with groups of people framed as ‘vulnerable’ in normative ethical review processes and institutional frameworks, different registers of vulnerability may be at play; and for this reason, I argue that it is vital that researchers are attuned to the need to develop situated judgments of ethical practice and responsibility in situ. In this thesis I understand the concept of vulnerability to be an ontological condition of all living beings. By virtue of our embodiment, all human beings are

at risk of being exposed to disease, disability, injury and death, thus making us inherently vulnerable and dependent on care¹.

Argument and Contribution

A first argument this thesis makes is that over the last decade, ‘vulnerability’ has become an increasingly important part of the categorisation of refugees, with important implications for practices of support, accommodation, integration and settlement. Following the literature that has analysed this importance, I further argue that the concept of vulnerability is fast becoming the exclusive grounds on which refugee protection is afforded in practice. This underlines vulnerability’s use as a resource, as being the only route to protection (increasingly), has heightened what Martin (2020) calls ‘status value’ (p.742), enmeshing it in an economy of property allocation, educational provision and humanitarian support.

The term ‘refugee’ became a legal category in the way we know it today after World War Two when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1951 and the Refugee Convention came into being (Malkki,1995b). The legalisation of the status of the refugee and its international recognition has created a process of categorisation of people based on bureaucratically assumed needs (Zetter,1991). In recent decades, forced migration patterns have become even more complex, politicising the refugee label and embedding it within a wider political discourse of resistance to refugees and migrants (Zetter, 2007). Within this discourse the refugee label is adapted according to the needs of the institutions managing them. I argue that part of this adaption of the refugee label has been the embedment of the term ‘vulnerability’ as a legal category for refugee resettlement. I show that ‘vulnerability’ as a criterion of resettlement for schemes such as the VPRS has been

¹ In this thesis, I distinguish between this inherent sense of vulnerability and the more restricted applications of specific understandings of ‘vulnerability’ used in VPRS and other relevant policies, by using single quotation marks (‘) to signify the latter. For example, ‘vulnerable’ refugees or UNHCR ‘vulnerability’ criteria.

added to a localised form of cultural expectations on ‘authentic’ refugeehood-i.e.

‘vulnerability’ is an integral part to the conceptual separation between individuals worthy of protection and those who are not. Under new measures proposed in this country and elsewhere, like the Illegal Migration Act of 2023, protection is in practice being withdrawn on this basis, as asylum-seeking via routes other than resettlement are illegalised.

Vulnerability, in this sense, is not only an exclusionary concept attached to refugeehood but has also become the exclusive grounds on which refugeehood is judged.

Looking at the implementation of VPRS, I find that vulnerability as a sign of ‘authentic’ refugeehood is embedded in the general understandings of vulnerability that actors involved in the scheme share, even though awareness of the exclusions they imply may differ between individuals. Local authorities applied understandings of vulnerability when they first started setting up the logistics of the VPRS but also when they prepared to welcome a family.

Understandings of vulnerability also feed traditional understandings of what it means to be a ‘refugee’, a category and understanding that the Voluntary and Community Sector (henceforth VCS) often works with, and reproduces, when they apply for funding or communicate with the public. And finally, understandings of vulnerability are also reflected in the way refugees themselves attempted to set out a more general understanding of vulnerability, separate from their direct experiences.

All these understandings share similarities but also differ distinctly. In analysing them, I have been able to distinguish three layers in such understandings. The first layer pertains to the UNHCR ‘vulnerability’ criteria as it applies them in the process of decision-making over which refugees are eligible for resettlement to the UK. Beyond this layer, actors within the VPRS recognise additional layers to vulnerability as they implement protection practices in their everyday work and as they experience these practices. The second layer consists of the vulnerabilities refugees face in the countries they initially fled to but are not yet resettled

from. A significant example here is the racism individuals faced by fellow Muslims in predominantly Islamic countries they fled to before they were resettled in the UK. The third layer refers to the vulnerabilities refugees face post-resettlement as they integrate in the North East of England. An example here is the lack of communication with British people, which impacted the development of English language skills and feelings of social isolation. These two additional layers of vulnerability interact with the application of UNHCR criteria in ways that may exacerbate or alter the attitudes towards ‘vulnerability’ as originally applied under these criteria. Many of the people I have interviewed related experiences that cut across these different layers of vulnerability.

My argument then, that vulnerability is an exclusionary and exclusivist conceptual tool, extends to the fact that vulnerability also excludes conditions that arise alongside, in addition to, and in phases subsequent to, the mobilisation of ‘vulnerability’ by the UNHCR framework. In other words, not only does VPRS fail to recognise other refugees as also being ‘vulnerable’, but it also fails to address vulnerability in a holistic way, by accounting for the multiple ways in which people are made, continue to be, and are remade as, vulnerable during their journeys into protection and resettlement.

The second argument is about the political ways we understand the concept of vulnerability. In my analysis of vulnerability, I examine understandings that go beyond the administrative frame that standardises the expected characteristics attached to the legal categorisation of ‘vulnerability’ as outlined above. I find that the state expects those resettled via schemes such as the VPRS to overcome the barriers the different forms of vulnerability imposed on them and become independent, settled and able to start new lives as soon as possible. This is especially evident in areas affected by austerity like the North East. In this conceptual frame, the ‘vulnerable’ refugee will eventually integrate in the host community and become transformed into a citizen. To succeed in this goal the individual needs to adopt the ambition

of becoming entrepreneurial and constantly competing with themselves and others to do better. In other words, the individual needs to embrace a neoliberal subjectivity of a political form of citizenship from which the refugee condition is excluded.

Because of this, I argue that the use of ‘vulnerability’ in resettlement schemes like the VPRS can in fact negatively impact the life of refugees. In today’s management of migration flows, as argued above, prescribed forms of refugeehood are shaped by the assumptions of what vulnerability should look like. But in fact, this connects to and prescribes a political imaginary whereby the end of ‘vulnerability’ (and refugeehood) is determined on whether the refugee is capable of being entrepreneurial, as they become a proper -citizen – subject of the state. This builds on existing discussions of citizenship as an inherently exclusionary category that sustains, and supports, the unequal treatment of lives, relying as it does on distinctions between citizen and non-citizen (Arendt, 1951; Arendt, 1958; Fassin, 2018; Malkki, 1995a; Nyers, 2006; Nyers, 2018). I find that the VPRS is an example of the contradictions evident in supposedly democratic societies such as the UK. On the one hand the VPRS seems to be working towards an improvement of the lives of resettled refugees. On the other hand, this improvement is drawing lines of deservingness that put the onus on refugees themselves to transition into becoming ‘proper’ political subjects / citizens. In other words, the politics attached to the concept of vulnerability is a politics of exclusion created within a neoliberal context.

In examining these tensions around exclusion in resettlement, I consider alternatives that could address vulnerability in more inclusive ways. To do this, I draw from literature on the ethics of care (Fisher and Tronto, 1990; Goodin, 1985; Held, 1987; Held, 2005; Nussbaum, 2006; Ticktin, 2011; Tronto, 1998) and Butler’s notion of grievability (2004; 2009) to argue

that a way to address these exclusions is to create a formal framework of protection for refugees that prioritises care over justice. Doing so might mean that if the term ‘vulnerability’ is to be kept in the language used by international policy for refugee protection, this should be applied in a way that underlines our inherent vulnerability as humans and urges a solidarity that understands the importance of the obligation to care for others when this inherent vulnerability is provoked. In other words, the exclusions inherent to the application of ‘vulnerability’ as a criterion should be recognised and solidarity should become a relational practice that is lived and embodied with measures developed to redress exclusions, so that protection is broadened rather than restricted.

As I engaged with critical discussions of vulnerability, I saw that similar understandings also apply to research policies and not just governmental ones. Thus, the final argument I make is on methodology. I argue that when conducting research with groups of people framed as ‘vulnerable’ in normative ethical review processes and institutional frameworks, it is vital that researchers are attuned to the need to develop situated judgments of ethical practice and responsibility in situ. Critically, this may mean questioning or challenging existing ethical guidelines to prioritise the community they are interacting with and to build and sustain ethical research relationships. Ethical guidelines are useful when planning research, but these should not be considered as fixed and final when they encounter the practice of field research. Indeed, my research highlights the requirement for adaptability in research as circumstances change, challenges emerge, and researchers are required to respond, often in ways that exceed any formal set of ethical guidance. If as researchers we genuinely want to consider equality, partnership, and autonomy in a way that would not harm the community we are interacting with, listening to participants and prioritizing their needs and interests is essential, even if this produces points of tension with formal ethical templates and guidelines. In the case that I discuss in the thesis, I found that refugee families like those resettled in the North East do not

always understand informed consent in, the same way researchers in academic settings are trained to comprehend consent. The traditionally defined concept of informed and voluntary consent promoted by universities involves culturally bound, western values of individual autonomy, self-determination, and freedom which does not capture the means needed to carry out interviews with the resettled community in the North East. It is therefore important to redefine informed consent in a way that would reflect the communities researchers are interacting with. Connecting with my previous argument, this is an issue that needs to be considered in all scenarios of working with those framed as ‘vulnerable groups’, because the way the term ‘vulnerability’ is used in such framings can lead to exclusionary and discriminatory practices that do not recognise our inherent vulnerability as humans and the obligation to care for others when this inherent vulnerability is provoked.

The structure of the thesis

Following this introduction, the three arguments discussed above are developed within nine chapters, structured as follows.

Part I consists of chapters two, three and four which set the background to my research. In chapter two I discuss the theories I found most relevant to my discussion of vulnerability and its relation to refugees and displacement. I first trace the categorisation of refugees and explore how the term ‘vulnerability’ is integrated as an assumption in the legal categories that distinguish between people who deserve protection and those who do not. I then engage with theorisations of vulnerability related to grievability and care to establish the understanding of vulnerability this thesis will develop. In chapter three I analyse further how ‘vulnerability’ has been integrated and defined in international policies of refugee protection and resettlement. I explain how refugee resettlement has been increasingly relying on a language of ‘vulnerability’ to organise its practices. I then discuss refugee resettlement in the UK, and

how policies on resettlement evolved alongside the shifting priorities of the international community on resettlement, identifying the significance of the VPRS within this timeline. I then situate my examination of the VPRS in the North East of England, engaging with the neoliberal ideology and the implications of austerity at the local level that framed the implementation of the scheme in the North East. In chapter four I discuss the methodology used in the project, research for which took place in 2020-2021, during the global COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns put in place as a result. I unpack two of my initial experiences whilst preparing for and being in the field researching vulnerability. I explain that undertaking fieldwork remotely was the most appropriate approach to carry out research during the pandemic, however, the mitigation of risks was exacerbated in the remote approach. This also meant a shift from an ethnographic approach to an interviews-based one. In discussing my approach to interviews, I pay particular attention to the tension between ethical guidelines and applying them in practice.

Part II consists of chapters five, six and seven, which introduce the three actors situated in the North East of England and discuss their roles within the region in relation to the VPRS: local government, VCS and resettled refugees. Chapter five introduces local government, framing them within the context of austerity. Presenting my interview material, I find that within the same region, local authorities have different experiences and approaches to their participation as hosts of the VPRS. Three approaches were particularly prominent. The first approach is that of the ‘trailblazers’, who piloted the VPRS in the region and drew from previous experience of refugee support and infrastructure to carry out the necessary operations of the VPRS. Second, was the approach of the local authorities who ‘came at it completely fresh’ but with some resources available and chose to set separate teams specific to the operations of the VPRS to allow for better clarity on the responsibilities of their team. Finally, I show the approach of local authorities who had to ‘start from scratch’ most of their refugee provision

of care due to the limited infrastructure they had existing before the enactment of VPRS.

Chapter six presents the three different VCS groups I found to be operating in the North East and trace the different forms of solidarity they engaged in during the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe and its aftermath. The VCS in the UK has always been filling in the gaps of welfare state provision through civic solidarity, however the 2008 austerity cuts significantly influenced the sector’s responses. I argue that pre-existing infrastructure survived austerity by establishing new partnerships. The growing demand for services from the increasing number of people in the region in 2015 onwards also led to the founding of new charities to support local authorities with no previous infrastructure and experience in welcoming refugees and asylum seekers. Through this set of interviews, I also find that the North East managed the increased demand of refugee provision by redirecting the aims of local churches. The most prominent forms of solidarity in the context of the VCS in the North East, are civic solidarity and institutional solidarity, which co-existed in different extents across the three VCS groups operating in the region, and were significantly shaped by VPRS. Through these observations I also note that civic solidarity is not one directional and that the VCS can initiate the process of local authority participation. In chapter seven I discuss the experiences of refugees resettled through the VPRS the North East of England. I describe families’ feelings from arrival, their experiences of housing provision, learning English and family reunification. Drawing from these themes, I show that the enactment of the VPRS is enough to pull individuals out of the ‘bare life’ mode that Agamben (1995) discusses, and which often defines the conditions that refugees and asylum seekers live in, but it does not extend to a good and political life that allows one to flourish either.

Part III consists of chapters eight, nine and 10. In chapter eight I focus on the various understandings of vulnerability I encountered through my discussions with the three actors prominent in this research. My interviews reveal three main understandings. First, the

vulnerabilities that deemed refugees eligible for resettlement to the UK as per the UNHCR ‘vulnerability’ criteria were those that local authorities applied in dispensing services to them. Second, the vulnerabilities refugees faced in their host countries pre-resettlement were added onto those ‘primary vulnerabilities’, creating additional needs in resettlement. Third, the vulnerabilities refugees face post-resettlement as they integrate in the North East of England are oftentimes quite different to the ‘vulnerabilities’ that elicited their inclusion in the VPRS in the first place. These three layers of vulnerability have different registers and implications. They are registered as indications of refugeehood by international bodies and national authorities in the first instance, national and local authorities in the second, but are often ignored in the third. This means that although VPRS addresses primary protection needs, it sets refugees up in a trajectory where exclusion often accompanies the experience of resettlement. Chapter nine develops this analysis further and revisits the concept of vulnerability to consider what type of subjects the VPRS produces and what traits of subjectivity this mobilisation of vulnerability entails. I argue that the VPRS has enforced the criterion of ‘vulnerability’ as a bordering practice which extracts value from the lives of refugees and produces the good refugee and ultimately, the neoliberal subject. I show that young refugee adults in the North East have been aspiring to become neoliberal subjects. Chapter 10 concludes the thesis by highlighting the contributions this thesis makes to the political analysis of refugee protection and migration and the key lessons for the future of refugee resettlement. In this chapter I articulate policy contributions that address ‘vulnerability’ as a category, theoretical contributions to vulnerability as a concept and methodological contributions to researching vulnerability. I also emphasise the volatile environment of experimentation with refugee protection which is now becoming evident not only in the UK but globally and critically consider the risks that this entails.

PART I Contextualizing the Research

Chapter 2-Delineations of Vulnerability

Introduction

The term ‘vulnerable’ is at the core of what this thesis explores, through the application of the VPRS in the North East of England. ‘Vulnerability’ first started appearing as a term in the language of governmental and non-governmental frameworks of human rights in the 1970s (Savaş et al, 2023). Since then, the terms ‘vulnerability’ and ‘vulnerable’ have been interchangeably used and slowly integrated into the terminology used for populations in need of support (ibid). This can also be seen in the VPRS. For an individual to be resettled through VPRS, it is required that they have one or a combination of the following requirements:

- (i) they have legal or physical protection needs.
- (ii) are survivors of torture or violence.
- (iii) require medical needs.
- (iv) are a woman or girl at risk.
- (v) need family reunification; are a child or adolescent at risk.
- (vi) lack foreseeable alternative durable solutions.

This standardisation of the use of vulnerability in schemes of refugee resettlement and beyond has fuelled ever since its adoption a growing amount of scholarly research on its definitions and practices (ibid), with a majority of this (a) discussing the different types of vulnerability, (b) criticising the labelling of different populations as ‘vulnerable’, and (c) debating its implications in practice (ten Have, 2015). Contributing to this literature, this chapter traces the categorisation of refugees and how ‘vulnerability’ became a legal category that helps distinguish between people who deserve protection and those who do not. It then

engages with theorisations on vulnerability related to grievability and care, which I draw from throughout this thesis.

Categorising Refugees

The term ‘refugee’ became a legal category after World War Two when specific regulations for displaced populations were put into place in the form of the Refugee Convention (Hathway, 2021). There were always processes in place to manage those seeking sanctuary (Zolberg et al, 1989) but the aftermath of World War Two created an emerging law around refugees, and the establishment of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1951 which would highlight refugees as an ‘international social and humanitarian problem’ (Malkki, 1995b, p.500). This led to a more standardized process recognised internationally around camp administration and refugee settlement (ibid). Part of this standardisation was the legal definition of refugees as the following:

the term ‘refugee’ shall apply to any person who [...] owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it’ (Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951, Art. 1, paras 1-4).

Even though this definition was initially created to provide protection to European refugees affected immediately before 1951, the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees would reinstate the definition’s value and legitimacy beyond World War Two and its geographical restrictions (Malkki, 1995b). It is worth noting here how selectivity around the

category of the refugee was evident even through its early definitions, as the initial definition was very much focused only on displacement in Europe (Kraus, 2021).

The last seventy years have seen an increase in the legislation around refugees internationally which has also multiplied the legal statuses under pertaining to the recognition of refugees. Processes of international recognition have resulted in the categorisation of people under labels like “refugees”, “illegal migrants”, “economic migrants”, “(bogus) asylum seekers” [and] “humanitarian immigrants” (Thomaz, 2017, p.201). These labels carry different levels of legitimacy and often enter public discourse to serve the needs of the state providing protection at any given time. Zetter (1991) was one of the first scholars to outline how the label for refugees has taken a selective, meaning that primarily serves the needs of public policy. Focusing on the Greek Cypriot population internally displaced in 1974, Zetter discussed how the internally displaced were compartmentalised into categories that would allow the state to fulfil certain managerial responsibilities towards those requiring protection. This was particularly evident in the way the first housing estates were allocated post conflict; displaced families of lower income and larger family status, were prioritised over smaller families with a higher income (Zetter, 1991). On a larger scale, another facet of this categorisation can be observed in the transition of the figure of the refugee post-World War Two as a predominantly male and White hero seeking sanctuary from totalitarian regimes (Thomaz, 2017) into ‘deprived, racialised and faceless masses mostly from the South fleeing extreme poverty and/or endemic conflicts’ (ibid, p.201) after the end of the Cold War. Revisiting his concept of refugee labelling 20 years later, Zetter (2007) acknowledges how the patterns of forced migration have become more complex compared to the past and that ‘governments in the global “north”, rather than NGOs as in the past, are now the pre-eminent agency’ (p.174) that transforms the refugee label. Governments’ attempts to manage processes and patterns of migration have as a result, politicised the refugee label in the past

two decades, embedding it into a wider political discourse of hostility towards migration that aims to restrict individuals' freedom of movement rather than protection from harm. De Genova et al (2018) underline how the freedom of movement, practised through autonomous migration, challenges governments' attempts to manage processes and patterns of migration and therefore they aim to control it by requiring those seeking protection to comply with governmental policies that increasingly deny protection through bureaucratic means and managerial processes centering on hostility.

As a result, individuals seeking protection from harm have become even more dependent on governments to authorise their ability to move across different spaces, in comparison to the initial applications of the Refugee Convention, highlighting that states have now monopolised 'the legitimate means of movement' (Torpey, 1998, p.240). Whereas in the minds of the Refugee Convention drafters, international law would guide the management of refugee protection by national states, now states monopolise these movements (by restricting the application of the Convention) and outsourcing the management to other actors within economic transactional frames (of infrastructure and service provision for example).

In this thesis I explore how vulnerability becomes an integral part of this monopoly of legitimised movement through schemes of refugee resettlement and how this creates tensions between protection and its denial. Processes set by states to recognise refugees indicate that states have a monopoly on deciding who is a refugee and who is not, despite the point of the refugee convention being to bestow protection on a condition of refugeehood that pre-exists recognition. Vulnerability-based schemes build on this monopoly, restrict recognition and in turn, protection, to the specific populations they target.

Within this frame, 'vulnerability' as a legal category has been subtly developed into various areas of governance over the last few years (Brown 2017), with literature concerned with

how ‘vulnerability’ as a legal category is used to intervene in individuals’ lives, often creating dichotomous representations of individuals as either ‘victims’ or ‘threat’ (Dunn et al, 2008; Fawcett, 2009). The VPRS has already been criticised as a policy that ‘increasingly raises the profile of vulnerability as it relates to refugees’ (Smith and Waite, 2019, p.230). Emerging refugee policies in Europe and the UK have been embracing these dichotomous representations (Smith and Waite, 2019) regarding the figure of the refugee, whose identity now vacillates between the ‘vulnerable’ and the ‘terrorist’:

Every refugee and migrant has now explicitly become a potential terrorist and vice versa. The two figures have been transformed into the other’s virtual double. The migrant is a potential terrorist hiding among the crowd of migrants, and the terrorist is a potential migrant ready to move into Europe at any moment (Nail, 2016, p.158).

Such narratives allow the ‘vulnerable’ to be sympathised with and potentially saved from danger, whilst refugees not considered ‘vulnerable’ to be rejected, or even labelled as terrorist (Nail, 2015). This shows how the politics of being a refugee may be predominantly linked to its legal definitions, but they are also linked to ‘cultural expectations of certain qualities and behaviours that are demonstrative of “authentic” refugeeeness (e.g. silence, passivity, victimhood)’ (Nyers, 2006, p.xv) which can render refugees more legitimately worthy of protection.

Cultural expectations of qualities demonstrative of ‘authentic’ refugeeeness are closely related to state assumptions around integration. State policies often outline integration as the final point of an asylum or resettlement process, with successful integration emphasised as independence, community engagement and social unity (Ager and Strand, 2008). In this context, integration can also be understood as a temporal mechanism where individuals need to move from dependence to integration. Policies usually consider the following four key

domains to measure the level of integration an individual has reached within a given timeframe: ‘markers and means’ (Ager and Strand, 2008, p.170) through employment, housing, education and health; ‘social connection’ (ibid), ‘facilitators’ (ibid) such as language and cultural knowledge, and safety and stability, and finally ‘foundation’ (ibid) as rights and citizenship. Therefore, refugee protection offered by states is usually subject upon the ability of the individual to integrate successfully and in the given time frame whilst qualifying for any cultural expectations of qualities demonstrative of ‘authentic’ refugeeeness. This emphasises that integration policies can be restrictive and subject to individuals fitting into certain categories.

Recent literature discussing how deservingness is used to categorise refugees but also contributes to the implicit expectations of ‘authentic’ refugeeeness across cultures, exemplifies cases where integration policies are restrictive and conditional. Clarke et al (2023) for example, discuss deservingness in the context of the ‘good refugee’ ideal in Australia. They argue that whilst the ‘goodness’ of refugees was initiated as a positive narrative to accept refugees, this heightens the ‘undeservingness’ of refugees who may not be ticking the criteria of the ‘goodness’ box. In cases of post-resettlement, Ramsay (2016) observes this through the governmentality found in the child welfare system in Australia. Whilst the welfare system protects children at risk of harm, it also subjects mothers to a logic of white neoliberal motherhood and ultimately, the idealised standard of Australian citizenship. Ramsay (2017a) explores this further by looking into the interventions of the Australian state for child protection, where post-resettlement African women experience the forced removal of their children not because of parental deficiency but because they do not fit into the standards of a white neoliberal motherhood. Through this, motherhood is governed as deserving or undeserving of civic belonging depending on the standards of white neoliberal motherhood, disrupting the women’s notion of personhood and asserting the reproduction of children as a

resource. These experiences exemplify the overall racialisation towards women resettled in Australia from Central African countries that reflect the dominance of colonial legacy remaining in the country which dictate the levels of ‘goodness’ of refugees resettling in the country (Ramsay, 2017b).

The logistics of welfare deservingness are also discussed by Nielsen et al (2020) in the context of Europe. They highlight that deservingness criteria contribute to the construction of images on how specific groups should be to deserve welfare support in the country. One of these constructed images of deservingness is gender. Zadhy and Erman (2022) discuss the gendered discourse around refugee deservingness in humanitarian aid in Turkey and how it contradicts the Turkish public discourse about Syrian refugees. Humanitarians portray refugee women as nurturing and caregivers, whilst Turkish society sees Syrian refugee women as a sexualised threat to the Turkish family. These tensions create challenges to refugee women whose humanitarian aid distribution is affected. Whichever the interpretation of ‘authentic’ refugeeeness may be, the cases explored by this literature show that the notion of ‘welcome’ has a fragility that is always at risk of being suppressed or depoliticised; this then constrains political debate and frames individuals as a ‘burden’ (Darling, 2018; 2016). This fragility inheres in the fact that as Malkki (1995a) emphasises, ‘refugeeness is [...] an aberration of categories, a zone of pollution’ (p.4), as ‘[refugees] occupy a problematic, liminal position in the national order of things...’(pp.1-2). This is a result of colonial legacies prominent in Europe and beyond around the notions of refugee welcome and integration, which as Murphy and Vieten (2025) argue, are in dire need of a decolonial lens that assumes an understanding rooted in mutual exchange and respect. This is because in practice, integration for individuals is not a one-way process whose bureaucratic list needs to be ticked off within a given timeframe, but an ongoing process of belonging and participation in social life (Radford et al, 2024; Huizinga and van Hoven, 2018). In fact, Phillimore (2012), finds

that integration practices in the UK that follow a ‘two-way process’ (p.525) with more interconnected initiatives between the different domains of integration allow for better engagement between refugees and wider society, which in turn, facilitates a more successful process of integration. In this thesis I examine whether the timeframe imposed on refugees via the VPRS integration policies is restrictive, especially for those who arrived in the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic. I also underline the different enactments of the VPRS related to integration policy by local authorities, the role VCS regarding these practices and the experiences of refugees themselves who were on the receiving end of these practices.

To transform refugees from burdens to benefits, refugeehood is often utilised by states as a resource. Particularly, Ramsay (2019a) discusses how the displacement of refugees should no longer be understood as exceptional, as refugee protection has shifted from a humanitarian imperative to an economic incentive, through which individuals are placed within a condition of ‘temporal dispossession’ (Ramsay, 2019b, p.396). In this instance, states seek to transform refugees from burdens of the economy to benefits, exacerbating individuals’ precarity and vulnerability (Ramsay, 2019a). Moreover, Avgeri (2025; 2024) discusses this within the framework of racial capitalism, where humanitarian responses to displacement in transit states like austerity-stricken Greece are promoted as remedies for both refugees and the local community. However, on the one hand the lives and labour of refugees are commodified and exploited (Avgeri, 2025), whilst on the other hand the development of the refugee aid sector, has normalised precarious labour within the local community across refugee-related services.

These cases also link to the conceptualisation of extractivism (Morris, 2020). Extractivism is often discussed in the context of wealthier governments of the Global North financing poorer countries often of the Global South, to extract value from refugees to the detriment of their prosperity. (ibid). Such is the case of the Republic of Nauru, the world’s smallest island state, whose depleted phosphate extraction industry in the 1990s led the state to resurge by acting

as a centre for the Australian government's offshore refugee processing and resettlement for those trying to reach Australia by boat (Morris, 2021b). In this instance, it is important to note the severe involvement of organisations of the refugee regime such as the UNHCR in these processes, enabling and affirming the extraction of value from refugees mentioned earlier (Morris, 2021a). This is evident in the way Nauruans perceive themselves and the refugee label (Morris, 2022). Even though they are increasingly at risk to become refugees themselves due to the impact of climate change, it is difficult for them to consider the possibility of becoming a refugee because of their involvement in the process of extractivism (ibid).

Value extraction is also discussed by Tazzioli (2019) who examines the financial support provided to asylum seekers in Greece via the European Union-funded Cash Assistance Programme. Asylum seekers are provided with monthly charged prepaid debit cards as a form of humanitarian aid, but this aid simultaneously is used to capture individuals' value by tracking, collecting and sharing their personal information with banks, NGOS and the Greek authorities. This exemplifies a case of 'extractive humanitarianism' (Tazzioli, 2022, p.177); operations that extract value from asylum seekers and refugees by exposing them to 'modes of subjectivation' (Tazzioli, 2020, p.71) through their roles as 'card beneficiaries' (ibid) and 'techno-users' (ibid). Similarly, in the UK asylum seekers under the Immigration and Asylum Act can receive help via the ASPEN debit card, if they can prove that they are destitute and have no other way to support themselves (Martin and Tazzioli, 2023). Transactions, however, are then shared with the Home Office who monitor individuals' mobility. Martin and Tazzioli (2023) conceptualise this as a case of 'carceral economies of migration control' (p.192), which they argue should not only be understood in the context of detention or confinement but also in the extraction of individual's value in cases such as data monitoring amongst others (ibid).

Schemes of refugee resettlement such as the VPRS in the UK have been replacing access to spontaneous asylum with policy focusing on ‘vulnerability’ to distinguish between those deserving and undeserving of protection (Smith and Waite, 2019). This emphasises how vulnerability is now added to the expectations of this ‘authentic’ refugeeeness which deems individuals worthy of protection. It also shows how vulnerability is used as a resource, which allows refugees to relocate but also local authorities and the Voluntary and Community Sector to access funding. In the chapters that follow I trace how these expectations are interpreted regarding ‘vulnerability’ as a criterion of resettlement for the VPRS and trace cases of vulnerability as a resource. Through this I also underline the following: how do the characteristics of ‘vulnerability’ that enable refugees to resettle in the North East of England compare to those that individuals have experienced pre-resettlement, and what happens to the notion of vulnerability post-resettlement?

The way states use deservingness to define and divide refugees has political and practical implications that have been studied extensively by scholars. Political implications have extensively been discussed through the notion of ‘bare life’ as presented by Agamben (1995), whose attempts to redefine citizenship and sovereignty have been very influential in discussions of refugeehood and the politics of refuge. Agamben reflects on bare life by discussing the life of the Homo Sacer who under the Roman law is denied the rights of political citizens and entry into the political sphere as a way of the sovereign enforcing its authority through exclusion. Agamben illustrates how the sovereign has the power to decide who belongs into the category of the bare life, defining the margins of citizenship and deciding who is excluded or included in the political sphere. If you belong to the category of bare life, you are excluded from the political sphere, unable to flourish and participate actively in the community. Moreover, bare life is one that can be sacrificed and killed with impunity. In contemporary sovereign configurations, this denial to a humanity participating

actively in the community also entails a denial to '[the] capacity for credible speech, [which] has been reduced to an anguished cry, [...] [whilst the] fundamental human right to mobility has been declared bogus, leading to criminalisation and detention' (Nyers, 2006, p.95).

This exclusion and inclusion to citizenship has led to an 'unequal treatment of lives' (Fassin, 2018, p.94). Fassin (2018) identifies a duality in the understanding of life which he analyses through its various forms. He recognises that there is a moral tension between 'an ethics of life', where he recognises life as sacred and 'a politics of life' (p.75), which he sees as necessary for financial reparations. Democratic societies are rooted in this distinction, which often leads to an 'unequal treatment of lives' (p.94). A range of scholars have discussed the practical implications of this unequal treatment of lives. Nyers (2018) for example, explores the relationship of citizenship and deportation. Considering the growing movements against deportation and detention, Nyers explores the ways citizens can become deportable 'irregular' citizens whose rights of citizenship can be suspended. He identifies citizenship as political subjectivity which is challenged by the denial of recognition, rights and return.

The unequal treatment of lives is also fundamental in Hannah Arendt's (1951; 1958) work, where she critically discusses statelessness as a core concern of human rights and international politics. In the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt (1951) traces the history of totalitarianism and how it materialised. Drawing from examples of anti-Semitism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, she highlights how totalitarianism was a mode of governance that denied political action and justified its atrocities by targeting specific classes of people whom it first forced into statelessness and ultimately, death. Building on this, in *The Human Condition* Arendt (1958) explores the concept of the human existence and what life means in the modern age. She is concerned with human activity, which she discusses through the concept of 'vita activa' (p.5), underlining three main elements for it: labour, work and action. As Arendt explains, 'labour is the activity which corresponds to the biological

processes of the human body' (ibid) and is necessary for the preservation of individuals and species. This is the lowest element in the hierarchy of elements of the *vita activa*. Next is work, which she identifies as 'the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence [and], provides an "artificial" world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings' (ibid). At the top of the hierarchy of elements is action, which Arendt understands as 'the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things [and which she considers] the condition [...] of all political life' (ibid). Arendt recognises that whilst human powers increase through technological advancements, these advancements also give us less control over our actions, reducing activities to the element of labour. In other words, human activities in the modern age are reduced to biological survival (labour), weakening individuals' abilities for political participation (action). Mastering our ability to act is the key ingredient of freedom and the ability to bring about change. Arendt's concepts lie at the core of Agamben's conception of the political life (*bios*) that he juxtaposes to bare life (*zoe*).

Part of this ability to act politically, according to Arendt, should include challenging our understandings of refugeeness. As Nyers claims:

The refugee is an aberration only when people accept as a matter of common sense that citizenship is the only authentic political identity of modern political life. Refugees are voiceless not in any essentialist way but only through the congenital disorder that comes with being classified as the absence of the sovereign voice capable of intervening in the public sphere (Nyers, 2006, p.17).

Malkki's (1995a) discussion on the two groups of Hutu refugees who fled Burundi in 1972 and sought refuge in Tanzania exemplifies this. She outlines that the one group was placed in an isolated camp within a rural area whilst the second was dispersed in a town amongst non-

refugees. Whilst the town refugees leaned into the social context of the town and the identities they observed in their surroundings, the camp refugees held on to their refugeeness as an identity that would allow them to recreate a homeland in Burundi. As a result, *the camp had become a central means of asserting separateness from 'other' categories, of resisting any form of 'nationalization', and was in this sense a locus of categorical purity [...], [whilst the town refugees] dissolved national categories in the course of everyday life and produced more cosmopolitan forms of identity instead* (pp.3-4).

Whilst the Hutu refugees were forced to live in categories that they did not create on their own, they also managed to undermine the authority of states who wanted to exclude or strip them from their human rights and created new categories based on their refugeeness to identify themselves. Camp refugees asserted, in other words, agency in mobilising a category used to undermine their rights towards rights claiming as a refugee group. Refugeeness can be politicised by states who manage human movement across borders, but it can also allow individuals to reinstate their identities to citizenship after displacement. In other words, the implication is that refugees and citizens are polar opposites but also mutually exclusive. This duality in the expression of refugeeness underlines Nyers' point (2006):

refugee situations should [...] be understood as complex, multidimensional sites of identity practices. Refugee identity is not merely the negative, empty, temporary, and helpless counterpart to the positive, present, permanent and authoritative citizen (p.24).

However, it can be argued that individuals who reinstate their identities after displacement and do not conform to the cosmopolitan forms of identity imposed on them, are more susceptible to the 'bare life' and a denial of citizenship. This implies that the more isolated populations are after they have been granted protection, the less political it becomes.

Challenging our understanding on refugee situations further, Demetriou (2018) explores

refugeehood, which she identifies as a subject position different to refugeeeness as an identity, of individuals in Cyprus after the 1974 conflict. For Greek Cypriots internally displaced after the conflict and those growing up in Cyprus after that, ‘a sense of generalised refugeehood’ (p.3) was cultivated, where being a ‘refugee’ and the loss that attached to it, is a political affect shared by the whole population of Greek Cypriots regardless of if they had to be displaced or not and is a structural aspect of the island’s citizenship regime. This situation is a challenge itself to the expected understandings around the legalisation of refugees internationally, as refugeehood becomes a fundamental part of the citizenship imaginary – refugees are, in other words, ideal citizens. In this context, Demetriou further shows how the narratives of refugeehood she identifies within the Greek Cypriot community, have created legal and affective parameters that connect the 1974 conflict to all displacement, producing, post-1974 ‘political subjects who are oriented in specific ways vis-à-vis refugeehood, explicitly or unbeknown to themselves’ (p.10). Examples of these subject positions include:

An economic migrant who pines for home in southern Nicosia but not a home in south Asia; asylum seekers whose claims may be judged on whether they have crossed a ceasefire line in Cyprus but not multiple lines before getting there; foreign women who suffer violence normalised by a militarist structure sustained through concepts of refugeehood; Cypriots who engage in litigation battles because their losses are not properly scripted into the calibrations of refugeehood by the powers that be (p.10).

Building on Malkki, Nyers and Demetriou, in this thesis I challenge the ways we comprehend vulnerability and seek understandings beyond the standardisation and expected characteristics that are attached to the legal categorisation of vulnerability. In this quest for a better understanding of vulnerability I take on board Nyers’s (2006) viewpoint that refugees are only considered an aberration because we have forced this classification on them, a classification that discards anyone facing forced displacement from the public sphere. In this

sense, I also embrace Demetriou's (2018) distinction of refugeehood from refugeeness and recognise that being a refugee is a subject position rather than an identity. Finally, I build on Malkki's (1995a) account that refugeehood is a subject position enforced on individuals by states who manage human movement across borders, but it can also reinstate new subject positions after displacement. I do this by conversing with refugees resettled via the VPRS and ask them to outline how they understand their own vulnerability. This allows me to see the parameters at work in the citizenship discourse and the inclusions and exclusions that the use of 'vulnerability' in the VPRS can effect through an unequal treatment of lives.

Theorising Vulnerability

To engage with vulnerability as a category and challenge the expected characteristics attached to it, I consider some of the ways in which the concept has been theoretically analysed.

(a) Grievability

A first theorisation of vulnerability I draw from is Judith Butler (2004; 2009) and their discussions on grievability.

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Butler (2004) considers the conditions following the events of September 11, 2001. They identify how after September 11, 2001, individuals are left in a state of precariousness; 'a precariousness of the Other' (p.56) or 'a primary vulnerability to others'²(p.9) which for that instance they identified as a combination of fear, loss of human life and mourning. The US government responded to this vulnerability with 'military violence and retribution' (p.8), as well as constraints on the 9/11 narrative. Anyone attempting to understand the attacks through the involvement of the United States in various political conflicts were often dismissed. Hiding behind the lens of a

² Butler refers to precariousness and vulnerability interchangeably, treating them as synonyms.

‘national melancholia’ (p.9) the US government justified its acts of violence as nation-building whilst the lives the US has killed in its involvements in conflict were erased from public narratives. Concerned of the government’s approach to vulnerability, Butler critiques how the United States treats human life:

some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what accounts as a livable life and a grievable death (p.9).

Butler’s engagement with vulnerability is simultaneously a political but also an ethical critique of the obligations we have as a human race to cure injustice and relieve suffering (Mackenzie et al, 2014). This is relevant for this thesis because it recognises vulnerability as the root of solidarity (as a political and ethical practice), offering a lens for considering the obligations we have as a human race to those fleeing persecution to seek refuge elsewhere, which was the impetus behind the Refugee Convention. I understand solidarity as the three forms listed by Augustin and Jørgensen (2019):

(a) Autonomous solidarity:

implies relations and practices that are produced in self-organised (mainly urban) spaces [and] based in forms of horizontal participation such as direct democracy and assemblies to invigorate the equality among their members (p.40).

(b) Civic solidarity:

indicates ways of organising produced as civil society initiatives to include refugees. It counts a vast number of manifestations and actors, such as NGOs, local communities, and individuals. It is practiced by civil society that is not part of the state, but the degree of contention varies depending on the claims and strategies of

each organisation. [...] it is receptive to the idea that the vulnerabilities, which prevent people from participating on equal terms, must be eliminated (p.41).

(c) Institutional solidarity:

represents the formalisation in different degrees of solidarity, which connects the civil society arena with the one of policy-making. Institutional solidarity is usually related to how 'members contribute both because they are obliged to do so according to institutional arrangement and because they expect to get something back if they are in a situation of need' (p.41).

I also take onboard Calhoun's understanding that solidarity cannot be sustained just by formal legal frameworks and weak normative commitments, therefore is not automatic or given, but created and challenged through practices in the public sphere that are emotionally and culturally meaningful to people (Calhoun 2002; Calhoun 2003; Calhoun 2005). Connecting this to Butler's view of vulnerability allows us to appreciate that the concept of vulnerability exists beyond the categorisation of the refugee created by states through formal legal frameworks and that true solidarity emerges only by acknowledging that we are in tune with the precariousness of the Other and therefore, we are all interconnected. Therefore, a successful resettlement via schemes such as the VPRS depends not only on policies measuring integration through levels of employment and language skills as mentioned earlier but also on the development of a solidarity where refugees feel like they belong and where they feel that their vulnerabilities are seen regardless of how successful they have been in ticking off the boxes necessary for them to integrate.

The denial of vulnerability creates a solidarity that fosters inequalities and exclusion. This is exemplified by Fotaki (2021) who indicates that following the 2016 'refugee crisis' in Europe, solidarity has been used as 'an economic-technical concept, with weak normative commitment to the abstract and idealised promises for all that can easily be separated from its

social and ethical dimensions’ (p.297). This has caused terrible inequalities at the EU borders (ibid). A notion of solidarity that ‘emerges from the shared predicament of human life as a precarious condition, while recognising that precarity is unequally distributed between groups of people within/across different societies’ (ibid) is vital ‘to formulate a political strategy to counteract the neoliberal predicament that threatens all forms of life with extinction’ (ibid). It is also important to note that in this context, solidarity moves beyond the taboo of gift-giving and particularly charity, which was often considered by volunteers in the field prior the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015, as a threat to establishing relationships rooted in equality (Rozakou, 2016). Post 2015, the urgency surrounding that period reframed gifting as solidarity based on understandings of a horizontal community building and not a one-way gift (ibid), suggesting that solidarity should be understood as a collective enactment of responsibility in response to shared precarity.

Although Butler uses precariousness and vulnerability interchangeably as synonyms, it should be noted that the condition of precarity has been the subject of related but decidedly different theoretical consideration. The relationship between the two is worth considering here as their theorisation holds promise for thinking about the links between the conditions of displacement and austerity that this thesis considers. ‘[P]recarity is a descriptive and analytic term for socioeconomic, sociopolitical aspects pertaining to labor and life under contemporary neoliberal modernity (Lemke, 2016, p.17), ‘an agenda for transferring risks and insecurity onto workers and their families’ (Standing, 2011, p.1) also referred to as “precaritization” (Schmidt-Haberkamp and Gymnich, 2021, p.3). According to Standing (2011) this has led to the creation of ‘a new dangerous class’ (p.1) which he refers to as the ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2011, p.1). The precariat occupies ‘an inferior position and is more likely to find him-or herself in a materially or psychologically vulnerable situation’ (Lemke, 2016, p. 14). This arises in the late capitalist formations of what Povinelli describes as

‘economies of abandonment’ (Povinelli, 2011, p.186), referring to the ‘modes of exhaustion and endurance [caused by neoliberalism] that are ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than [the] catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime’ (p.132) environment often encountered during and after conflict. The VPRS resettlement context that I consider here might be thought of as constituting the intersection between crisis and abandonment.

Humans have created ‘social institutions (especially political, familial, and cultural institutions)’ (Turner, 2006, p.26) to protect themselves and their ontological vulnerability against the instability of the world. However, these institutions are precarious ‘and cannot work without effective leadership, political wisdom, and good fortune to provide an enduring and reliable social environment’ (ibid). Cognizant that human vulnerability is connected to the precarity of these institutions and that human rights need to be understood ‘in terms of the relationship between the processes of embodiment and institutionalization’ (Turner, 2006, p.27), this thesis draws on the competition and austerity rooted in neoliberal ideology³ to understand the ways precarity shapes our obligations to cure injustice and suffering.

Moreover, it discusses how the categorizable aspects of vulnerability are accentuated under neoliberal conditions specific to the contemporary global order.

Further work on precariousness/vulnerability has shown how it ‘denotes the ethical aspiration to overcome these destabilising conditions to, ideally, mitigate the precarity of Others’ (Lemke, 2016, p.17). Precariousness or vulnerability is an ontological condition of all living beings: ‘There is no living being that is not at risk of destruction’ (Butler, 2009, p.xvii). This is because all human life is inherently vulnerable ‘by virtue of our embodiment’ (Mackenzie et al., 2014, p.2). ‘Human beings have bodily and material needs; are exposed to physical illness, injury, disability, and death; and depend on the care of others for extended periods

³ I discuss neoliberalism, austerity and the UK further in the next chapter.

during our lives' (Mackenzie et al, 2014, p.2). As a result, 'the problems of the precarious are no longer "their" problem alone, because "we"-as a people, as a society, as the human race-are implicated in the precarity of others' (Lemke, 2016, p.17). In engagement with Butler's work Fineman (2008) takes this a step further arguing that "'the vulnerable subject" must replace the autonomous and independent subject asserted in the liberal tradition' (p.2) as it is a lot more inclusive of the experiences of most citizens. She suggests that a new model of the state should emerge as a result, one that is attuned to the needs of the vulnerable subject to create a more equal society. In line with this thought, lives should not be categorised into grievable and ungrievable:

Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life.[...] Grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of the living being as living, exposed to non-life from the start (Butler, 2009, p.29).

In a similar process of thought, vulnerability as a category of refugee suffering, should not render whose life is worth providing protection and is therefore grievable, and whose is not. First, because we are all inherently vulnerable by virtue of our embodiment and second, because this categorisation would create discrimination and exclusion between those seeking protection. Nevertheless, as Butler (2004) outlines, states often render certain groups of people as unworthy of being grievable.

In modern legal discourse vulnerability has started appearing as 'a privileged social value' (Pétin, 2016, p.91), with policy makers using the notion of vulnerability 'to provide a higher level of protection for a particular group or individual [...]: bringing special protection to [those they render as] vulnerable persons' (Pétin, 2016, p.92), whilst others not so fortunate to acquire the label are cast aside, criminalised and often detained. Since the September 11, 2001 events in the US and the July 7, 2005 bombings in London in the UK for example,

media and politicians in the UK have been making consistent connections between terrorism and asylum seekers (Bhatia, 2015). This has added a layer of criminalisation to anyone breaching immigration and asylum policy (ibid) which has been increasingly restricting any form of access to asylum seekers across the UK border whilst letting in only those who are deemed vulnerable enough. The way vulnerability is used creates inequalities in the contemporary global order which are explained well by Fineman (2010) through her observations of discrimination in law:

This approach to inequality has set up a perverse dynamic that often results in pitting one protected group against another, dividing those who may otherwise be allies in a struggle for a most just society, as well as generating a politics of resentment and backlash on the part of those who perceive they are not within groups favoured by this approach to equal protection (p.253).

Fineman (2010) highlights that the way discrimination is acknowledged in American law creates further discrimination and exclusion. Only certain groups are protected against discrimination, and these are the ones who have historically been abused before. Similarly, the way vulnerability is acknowledged by several national and international laws as a way of protecting against discrimination, is creating further discrimination and exclusion. This is evident in the way immigration and asylum detention has been used worldwide. Whilst '[i]t is considered as being part of the States' sovereign power to control the entry, stay, and removal of third-country nationals from their territory (Pétin, 2016, p.92), conditions asylum seekers are often subjected to whilst in indefinite detention until an asylum decision is made are inadequate, with many western states found to be violating human rights norms under international law (Johnston et al, 2009; Pitman, 2010; Stagg, 2020). In Australia for example, the living conditions in detention centres are so poor that detainees often attempt self-harm (Ibekwe, 2021). Nevertheless, detention, as argued by Martin (2015) is more than a space

where people are detained. It is a process with a ‘specific spatiality [that] produces migrant precarity by successively criminalising, illegalising, and forcibly remobilising noncitizens’ (p.244). Butler (2004) outlines how prisoners detained indefinitely by the United States in Guantanamo Bay are not protected properly under international law since the United States even though claiming to follow the Geneva Convention, does not feel obligated to follow the law that this entails. Butler observes that

the humans who are imprisoned in Guantanamo do not count as human; they are not subjects protected by international law. They are not subjects in any legal or normative sense. The dehumanisation effected by “indefinite detention” makes use of an ethnic frame for conceiving who will be human, and who will not (p.10).

The Guantanamo case Butler uses to discuss grievability is legally different from the case of those who have experienced forced displacement. The purpose of the Refugee Convention is to provide individuals who are experiencing forced displacement a legal framework of protection. However, due to other state policies this legal framework is often disrupted, creating exclusions of individuals that might have access to this protection. Meanwhile, the Guantanamo case indicates how the US state was aiming to remove from individuals the legal status prisoners of war so that they have no protections under the Geneva Convention.

Despite their differences, grievability here becomes relevant to the focus of this thesis as it highlights the ways different groups of people can be ‘represented and treated within dominant schemes of power’ (Butler, 2021, p.184). Whether that group of people is ‘targeted in war, systematically detained, or abandoned or left to die, their lives do not count as lives worth sustaining or preserving’ (ibid). This can be because ‘there is no social or public policy aimed at securing a liveable life for them’ (ibid), but it can also be that the policies created disrupt the legal framework that was put in place to secure a liveable life. The connection between the two and their relevance to the processes of exclusion that applications of

vulnerability initiates was starkly made evident in the recent use of Guantanamo as a transit stop for deportation flights under Trump in early 2025 (Chao-Fong and Phillips, 2025).

As Costello and Mouzourakis (2016) highlight, international refugee law may presume that asylum seekers deserve protection, but the legal frameworks established by states, such as those following the European Union's legal framework, can frame individuals as detainable subjects. As a result, asylum seekers often find themselves indefinitely detained and not protected by international law, in many states they seek protection in, until a decision is made on their asylum applications. They are dehumanised, stripped of any legal or ethical obligations the state may have towards them, until the state decides whether they are a friend or foe that can be granted access into the country. In the UK, up to March 2024, there were 1,913 people held in immigration detention (Home Office, 2024).

This also links to Butler's discussion on the politics of framing. In *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Butler (2009) is particularly concerned about the ways media portray armed conflict and how it becomes an instrument of the West. Through this discussion Butler makes the wider argument that politics of 'framing' assign value to lives differently. This is relevant to this thesis because the way the politics of framing function, means that media and politicians can determine how refugees and asylum seekers are perceived and their predicaments made grievable or not. The VPRS was a response to the UNHCR's global resettlement needs in 2014 and was specifically tailored to refugees fleeing the Syrian conflict. At the time a so-called 'refugee crisis'⁴ was unfolding in Europe, which was approaching refugees with the frame of 'cautious tolerance', (Chouliaraki et al, 2017, p.15). Europe wanted to help refugees, but they were cautious of the consequences following that welcome. The image of Alan Kurdi, the 3-year-old Syrian boy who was found dead on a

⁴ I discuss the 'refugee crisis' in more detail in the next chapter.

beach in Turkey in September 2015, circulating in the media drastically shifted that frame to ‘ecstatic humanitarianism’ (ibid) and grievability, with an overzealous Europe looking to welcome mostly Syrian refugees through their borders despite the previous measures in place to protect nation states and Europe. Ecstatic humanitarianism was finally replaced by ‘fear and securitisation’ (ibid) following the November Paris attacks that switched the narrative once again to refugees as a threat and to their lives lost at the European border as ungrievable. In this thesis I explore how these politics of framing in Europe and in the UK have affected the microcosm of the North East of England and the levels of welcome, solidarity and hospitality that resettled refugees from the Syrian conflict were experiencing through the VPRS.

(b) Care

The understanding of vulnerability as a universal quality that inheres in our embodiment, coupled with the proposal that we are attuned to the vulnerability of others, leads to a consideration of the ethics of care as an aspect of theorising vulnerability. I understand care as defined by Fisher and Tronto (1990) as:

a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible, The world includes our bodies, ourselves and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web (p.40).

Following this understanding, I consider the ethics of care⁵, offering an additional angle to the normative importance of the concept of vulnerability and the understanding on the obligations we have as a human race to cure injustice and relieve suffering.

⁵ It is notable that vulnerability is often discussed as a secondary consideration in ethics of care, which means that vulnerability is discussed at the side and not at the centre of the theories developed.

In a series of feminist essays edited by Held (1987), the relationship between justice and care is explored. On the one hand, the contributors recognise that traditionally, justice⁶ is often assigned as a moral responsibility of men and care as a moral responsibility of women (Baier, 1987; Held, 1987; Friedman, 1987). Preliminary understandings of an ethic of care suggest a moral theory where justice and care should be in harmony for both men and women, with both insights combined (Baier, 1987). On the other hand, however, they also warn us about the dangers of accepting the values of caring as it is questionable whether the same understanding of care can be relevant simultaneously within a political life and in the household (Held, 1987). Friedman (1987), for example, says that there is a difference in the way we morally understand justice and care. Care in the household is the commitment to a particular person, whereas justice operating within the political sphere, is a generalizable moral commitment to others. Therefore, the two cannot be combined into one understanding around the ethic of care.

Building on from these essays, Held (2005) argues that care is more ethically significant than justice:

caring relations should form the wider moral framework into which justice should be fitted. Care seems the most basic moral value. As a practice, we know that without care we cannot have anything else, since life requires it. All human beings require a great deal of care in their early years, and most of us need and want caring relationships throughout our lives. As a value, care indicates what many practices ought to involve. [...] Though justice is surely among the most important moral values, much life has gone on without it, and much of that life has had moderately good aspects. [...] Without care, however, there would be no persons

⁶ Held (1987) understands traditional justice theories as being impartial and universal and used in legal and political frameworks to help with rational decision-making that prioritises fairness and individual rights instead of obligations such as care.

to respect and no families to improve. Without care, there would be no public system of rights-even if it could be just. [...] Within a network of caring, we can and should demand justice, but justice should not then push care to the margins (pp.71-72).

Linking this thought to refugees and Butler's critique of the obligations we have as a human race to cure injustice and suffering, I approach this thesis with the understanding that there is a need for care as a response to those obligations and that a way forward is to create legal and political frameworks of protection for refugees that prioritise care over justice. This allows for a solidarity that becomes a 'relational practic[e]' (Jennings, 2018) that is lived and embodied rather than abstract and symbolic (ibid). In turn, this encourages a solidarity that 'is non-exclusionary because it accounts for individual differences yet focuses on common vulnerabilities, establishing an obligation to care for the irreducible other' (Fotaki, 2021). Moreover, this also has the potential to encourage practices of integration that are less restrictive and conditional. As Nussbaum (2006) argues, traditional theories of justice and particularly those based on social contract theory, encourage images of social cooperation, where the pursuit of justice is dependent on a mutual advantage, whilst 'special responsibilities', like care, are reserved for relationships with friends and family (Goodin, 1985). In cases where care is involved outside the friend and family circle, can be often identified in 'regimes of care' such as humanitarianism or certain human rights movements or networks, which are tasked to '[govern] the less desirable portions of the populations when the state turns a blind eye to their presence' (Ticktin, 2011, p.10). In this instance, morally driven humanitarians, volunteers and activists 'end up "doing" politics despite not having a political mandate, unable to extract themselves from the mix of contemporary transnational regimes of labour, capital, and governance' (Ticktin, 2010, p.10). In fact, Rozakou (2012) underlines that care is at the root of biopolitical power which she exemplifies via cases of solidarity from the biopolitical management of refugee life in Greece. In the first case, she

explains how whilst asylum seekers in a camp are considered by the state a guest worthy of care and protection, they are simultaneously deprived of power and are dependent on the host to offer protection and care. As a second case, Rozakou (2012) examines the street, where volunteers whilst seen as intentionally pushing the limits of biopolitical power by visiting refugees in their homes and re-establishing them as political subjects through their role as hosts, this role is often disputed and refugees' ability to be hospitable challenged. These two cases underscore how there are limits to solidarity and these limits are grounded in power and hierarchies.

Moreover, practices of care from humanitarianism and human rights movements and networks were never created nor integrated within a regular state policy on immigration (Ticktin, 2011). They are specific sets of exceptions enacted in the name of care, to relieve suffering which despite them being introduced to oppose the narratives of exclusion surrounding immigration, they nonetheless create categorisations based on the level of suffering the human body is experiencing. Notably, this creates a 'population of second-class, disabled citizens- [who are] more mobile than other so-called able-bodied migrants- [who are considered] the "new humanity" [and are] produced and protected by regimes of care that focus on morally legitimate suffering bodies' (Ticktin, 2011, p.5).

This approach would suggest that prioritising responsibilities like care for friends and family is morally wrong and not only encourages weak normative commitments of solidarity, but also a restricted and conditional practice of integration. The way we intend to care for those close to us should be extended to those who are also strangers to us (Goodin, 1987). For this thesis this understanding extends to refugees but also their caregivers, or service providers in the VCS and local government. Recognising that human beings are inherently vulnerable by virtue of our embodiment, and that because of this vulnerability we are also attuned to one another, a new way of social cooperation is necessary where the state recognises basic human

capabilities as: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; the political and material control over one's environment (Nussbaum, 2006, pp. 76-77). In this way individuals receiving or providing care

need not contain the stigma and insult and the inordinate burdens that they used to contain ubiquitously, and now often still contain. A decent society will organise public space, public education, and other relevant areas of public policy to support such lives and fully include them, giving the caregivers all the capabilities on our list, and [those receiving care] as many of them, and as fully, as is possible (Nussbaum, 2006, p.222).

The way vulnerability is currently acknowledged in the context of refugees and beyond, emphasises a reluctance from states and the society to recognise how we are all inherently vulnerable, enforcing the easy solution of categorising specific groups of people like refugees as 'especially vulnerable' (Tronto, 1998, p.19) so that we can live under the illusion of an 'invulnerable autonomy' (ibid). This is because vulnerability is viewed as a weakness and regardless of their actual needs, it is assumed that 'vulnerable' populations (in this case refugees) require more care that will burden the services provided, if any, by the state. As a result, these responsibilities are often passed on to the VCS. In this thesis I examine how care is practiced in the North East of England by looking at local government and VCS practices. I will outline who are considered caregivers for refugees of resettlement via the VPRS and what limitations are there to this care and what consequences this may have for refugees themselves.

Vulnerability-a concept and category

In this chapter I traced the categorisation of refugees and how vulnerability has become a

legal category that helps distinguish between people who deserve protection and those who do not. I explained how the term ‘refugee’ became a legal category after World War Two, a time when a law around refugees emerged and UNHCR was established. This led to a legal definition of refugees that underlined individuals’ right of protection from harm. Since then, the legal status and recognition of refugees internationally increased. This international recognition led to a categorisation of people as ‘refugee’, ‘illegal migrant’ or ‘asylum seeker’ amongst others, with different labels carrying a different level of legitimacy regarding protection rights offered by the state. In recent years, the migration processes involved in this categorisation have become even more complex, with ‘vulnerability’ used by refugee resettlement schemes such as the VPRS to replace spontaneous asylum with policy focusing on distinguishing between those deserving or undeserving of protection. I have shown that the use of vulnerability to define and divide refugees has political and practical implications, which I connected to discussions made by scholars like Agamben (1995), Nyers (2006; 2018), Fassin (2018) and Arendt (1951;1958). Drawing from Malkki (1995a), Nyers (2006) and Demetriou (2018), I underlined the importance to challenge the ways we comprehend vulnerability and to seek understandings beyond the standardisation and expected characteristics attached to its legal categorisations.

To show the understanding of vulnerability this thesis will be drawing from in the next chapters, I engaged with theorisations on vulnerability related to grievability (Butler 2004; 2009) and care (Fisher and Tronto, 1990; Goodin, 1985; Held, 1987; Held, 2005; Nussbaum, 2006; Ticktin, 2011; Tronto, 1998). I argued that a way to address the exclusions created with the use of ‘vulnerability’ as a legal category is to create a formal framework of protection for refugees that prioritises care over justice. This allows for a solidarity that is lived and embodied rather than abstract and symbolic, which will account for individual

differences but also focus on common vulnerabilities. This will establish an obligation to care others, encouraging practices of integration that are less restrictive and conditional.

In the chapter that follows I map the policy and actors revolving around the VPRS setting the background of how ‘vulnerability’ is used as a legal category in refugee resettlement schemes in the UK.

Chapter 3-Mapping the Field: Policy and Actors

Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed vulnerability from a theoretical perspective engaging with the notions of refugee categorisation, grievability and care. In this chapter I will map the policy and actors involved in the VPRS. I will start by outlining how vulnerability has been integrated and defined in international policy of refugee protection. I will show that refugee resettlement policies have been increasingly relying on vulnerability language to organise their practices. I will then discuss refugee resettlement in the UK, outlining its development alongside the shift in the priorities of the international community on resettlement and identifying the significance of the VPRS within this timeline. I will then explain why I position my study of the VPRS in the North East of England, addressing the context which the VPRS is implemented there which is marred by austerity cuts applied to the region within a neoliberal frame. Neoliberalism and austerity cuts offer a vital context on the North East and its role in resettlement. I will conclude by highlighting the three actors that this thesis will be focusing on in the following chapters.

Vulnerability and International Policy

The use of the term ‘vulnerability’ in the debates and practices of international policy of refugee protection is a recent innovation (Mendola and Pera, 2021; Sözer, 2020). As discussed in the previous chapter, humanitarian organisations have been concerned more actively with the welfare of forced migrants since World War Two, a concern that was integrated in international policy with the UN Refugee Convention in 1951 and the founding of UNHCR (Sözer, 2020). The years following World War Two and during the Cold War era, international policy of refugee protection was shaped by the geopolitical landscape of the time that prioritised political purposes over humanitarianism. In fact, Keely (2001) argues

that there were two refugee protection regimes at the time:

One in the industrial countries of the first world vis-à-vis Communism and one for the rest of the world. The second regime was the sphere in which the UN High Commissioner for Refugees primarily acted, but it too was affected by the Cold War, particularly the proxy wars sponsored and supported by the great powers of East and West (p.306).

Within this logic, the aim of the former of the two regimes was not to ‘help restore stability to the international system’ (ibid, p.308), which is usually the purpose of international policy of refugee protection, but to ‘destabilise governments, cause states to fail, and create domestic support for a policy of opposing and weakening communist governments’ (ibid). For this reason, the figure of the refugee post-World War Two was a predominantly male and White hero seeking sanctuary from totalitarian regimes (Thomaz, 2017) rather than the ‘deprived, racialised and faceless masses mostly from the South fleeing extreme poverty and/or endemic conflicts’ (ibid, p.201) after the end of the Cold War.

‘Vulnerability’ was not used to determine protection practices until decades after the end of World War Two, at a time when the term was also being increasingly used in the broader context of bioethics and human rights (ten Have, 2015)⁷. A first mention of vulnerability in relation to forced migration can be identified in the early versions of the UNHCR’s Resettlement Handbook originally written in 1996. The 1997 version mentions vulnerability under the ‘UNHCR Criteria for Determining Resettlement as the Appropriate Solution’ (UNHCR, 1997, p.25). The criteria for resettlement at the time included: basic considerations; legal and physical protection needs; survivors of violence and torture; medical needs; women at risk; family reunification; children and adolescents; elderly refugees; refugees without local integration prospects. These reflect closely today’s

⁷ I talk in more detail about vulnerability and research ethics in the next chapter.

resettlement criteria, with one main difference; these were not criteria explicitly there to address the determination of asylum as it is today, but as a side note to the general criteria for resettlement that recognised that some groups, would be ‘more vulnerable than others’ (UNHCR, 1997, P.31).

A more purposeful mention of vulnerability can be found in a 2001 *Report on the World Social Situation* by the United Nations Economic and Social Council [henceforth ECOSOC], which defined vulnerability as ‘a state of high exposure to certain risks, combined with a reduced ability to protect or defend oneself against those risks and cope with their negative consequences’ (United Nations, 2001, p.14). The way ECOSOC defines vulnerability suggests an understanding of the term as a collective condition, which eventually shifted in the early 2010s into a category designated only to a special few, something which was foreshadowed in the way UNHCR’s 1997 Resettlement Handbook mentioned vulnerability. In applying these principles, Article 20.3 of the *Council Directive 2011/95/EU on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status of refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted*, states that:

‘Member States shall take into account the specific situation of vulnerable persons such as minors, unaccompanied minors, disabled people, elderly people, pregnant women, single parents with minor children, victims of human trafficking, persons with mental disorders and persons who have been subjected to torture, rape or other serious form of psychological, physical or sexual violence’.

This shows how policy language around refugees and vulnerability is changing to a more direct and exclusionary tone that associates certain groups of people with ‘vulnerability’ rather than the overall condition suggested in ECOSOC’s definition in 2001. Notably, this is

mostly shaped by regional and national instruments such as European Union law and national policies of member states (which is where the VPRS fits). Moreover, in 2011 UNHCR published as part of its legal and protection policy series a paper that discussed alternatives to the detention of refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons and other migrants (Edwards, 2011). Echoing the European legislation of that same year, a section of the paper titled ‘Special Protections and Considerations’ (ibid, p.45) states that children, persons with mental health, physical illness or disabilities, women and the elderly have specific ‘vulnerabilities’ that require special protection and consideration (ibid). The use of vulnerability to categorise people who require special protection in comparison to others within a group of people already recognised by the Refugee Convention to need protection, exemplifies the exclusion I have been discussing theoretically in the previous chapter. The way vulnerability has been embedded into international policy suggests that the term might be seen as being elevated to the status of a ‘privileged social value’ (Pétin, 2016, p.91) in international policy and for those making policy, even though those subject to such policy rarely experience this privilege.

In the years that followed a constant revision for international policy of those in need of special protection can be observed that would narrow even further the categories of those that should be considered ‘vulnerable’. For example, the *Council Directive 2013/33/EU laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection* introduced a chapter on the ‘provisions for vulnerable persons (Article 21) establishing what I quoted above from the 2011 version of this Article as a ‘General Principle’ (ibid) that also includes ‘victims of female genital mutilation’ (ibid). This General Principle should be implemented when Member States assess ‘the special reception needs of vulnerable persons (Article 22,1). Whilst at a first glance such changes in legislation were made to make the legal framework more inclusive of those requiring special protection, at the same time we can see an

increasing restriction of who may be deemed ‘vulnerable’ enough.

This is exemplified by tools which were developed around this time to facilitate the process.

In 2016 UNHCR in collaboration with the International Detention Coalition (IDC) developed, based on existing models and tools, a vulnerability screening tool that highlighted the following ‘vulnerability’ domains as requiring particular attention in a person’s evaluation of ‘vulnerability’ across asylum and migration systems:

- Children
- Sex, Gender, Gender Identity; Sexual Orientation
- Health and Welfare Concerns
- Protection Needs

Whilst the screening tool highlighted that this framework ‘is offered as a guide and is not to be taken as a rigid or exhaustive measurement of vulnerability’ (UNHCR and IDC, 2016, p.3) such frameworks encourage further regularisation of the use of vulnerability in resettlement practices for which there is a risk of becoming further exclusionary rather than inclusive of the conditions under which people find themselves at risk.

The regularisation of vulnerability domains is evident as they are also found in UNHCR’s more recent revisions of the Resettlement Handbook which explicitly states that ‘the use of resettlement as a tool of refugee protection requires effective methods for the early identification of vulnerable or “at-risk” individuals or families within a population of refugees’ (UNHCR, 2011, p.38). These frameworks are indicative of how restrictions effected at regional and national levels are feeding back into international guidelines.

The attempt to regularise vulnerability is also evident at the local level. In 2013 the UNHCR office in Jordan initiated the Vulnerability Assessment Framework (henceforth VAF) project that sought to create ‘a harmonised definition and measurement tool for vulnerability’

(UNHCR, 2018b, p.4) specific to Syrian refugees considered ‘the most vulnerable’ (ibid) in Jordan. In 2014 the VAF Steering Committee defined vulnerability as:

The risk of exposure of Syrian refugee households to harm, primarily in relation to protection threats, inability to meet basic needs, limited access basic services, and food insecurity, and the ability of the population to cope with the consequences of this harm (ibid).

Whilst this definition has retained key aspects of the definition of vulnerability identified from ECOSOC in 2001, underlining the insistence of the United Nations to address vulnerability as a condition affecting the population as a whole rather than particular identity groups in it, this definition is more refined and specific to the risks a specific group of refugees were experiencing at a host country at the time. In fact, this definition reflects the vulnerability assessment indicators listed by the VAF to identify those who are the most ‘vulnerable’ within the Syrian refugees who were seeking protection in Jordan.

Following the VAF initiative of the UNHCR office in Jordan, other UNHCR and similar humanitarian offices in countries like Lebanon and Turkey, where Syrian refugees sought protection after fleeing Syria, created their own vulnerability assessment frameworks that echoed similar indicators of ‘vulnerability’. These vulnerability assessment indicators can be summarised as: welfare, coping strategies, dependency, basic needs, education, food security, health, shelter and WASH services (showering water, drinking water, waste disposal etc.) (Kaya and Kiraç, 2016; UNHCR, 2017; UNHCR, 2018b). These ‘vulnerability’ indicators would then be used ‘to prioritise assistance and/or services’ (UNHCR, 2018b) to the most ‘vulnerable’ Syrian refugees.

The emergence of global ‘vulnerability’ criteria for resettlement versus host country-specific ‘vulnerability’ assessment indicators emphasises the contestation that exists between the different spheres of international policy that vulnerability operates in, but also, the political

dynamics at stake in the various definitions. Sandvik (2011) highlights how refugee resettlement policy, even within the UN system, balances between a formal and an informal sphere. The formal sphere represents the refugee resettlement framework as dictated by UNHCR's Resettlement Handbook, whilst the informal sphere represents the reality of UNHCR officers applying the formal instructions in practice, at the local level and the informal normativity that would be used to diverge from the formal processes. Taking this a step further, Menetrier (2021) shows the challenges between those representing the formal sphere in comparison to the informal sphere. The formal sphere is found in UNHCR's international staff following the training they learned in countries of the Global North whilst the regional staff are part of the informal sphere, who are often left out of the resettlement decision-making chain for fear that their presumed reactions and use of informal normativity would jeopardize the success of the process. The priorities put in place by host countries' 'vulnerability' assessment indicators following the Syrian conflict suggest an attempt of formalisation of the informal sphere. Nevertheless, this adds to an existing lack of clarity and confusion around the refugee resettlement process which has already been expressed both from refugees and UNHCR staff and highlighted by literature (Thompson, 2012). As the importance of the criterion of 'vulnerability' in the international policy of refugee protection has been growing, in the chapters that follow I outline what implications this fluidity has in the practice of local service providers post resettlement in destination countries like the UK.

Refugee Resettlement as a durable solution

Turning to the UK, the application of VPRS has been implemented within the 'durable solutions' framework that has guided refugee protection since the 1980s. By way of contextualising this implementation, this section addresses the application of durable solutions.

Based on the 1951 Refugee Convention, the UNHCR and states within the international community have a responsibility to provide a durable solution to refugees' displacement (Yacob-Haliso, 2016). The three main durable solutions in this case are voluntary repatriation, local integration within a host community and resettlement in a third country (UNHCR, 2024).

Repatriation refers to a refugee's return to their home country and is often considered by policymakers and the United Nations as the most preferable of the three durable solutions. Nevertheless, repatriation as a durable solution has its challenges. A main challenge is that even if repatriation is the preferred durable solution promoted by UNHCR, if the home country a refugee has fled from has not overcome the economic and political conditions which has led the mass movement of its people, then repatriation cannot be an option (Harrel-Bond, 1989). However, the longer a refugee remains away from their home country, presumably awaiting repatriation to become a suitable solution, the more difficult they may find adjusting to the changes the society in their home country has undergone since their departure (ibid).

Following the aftermath of World War Two and up until 1985, as a principle, voluntary repatriation was the preferred solution, but resettlement was also suggested in practice (Chimni, 1999). Between 1985 and 1993, repatriation would be promoted as the main durable solution, whilst emphasising that it should be a voluntary return (ibid). In 1993, the notion of safe return was highlighted as a middle ground between voluntary and involuntary repatriation whilst in 1996 the concept of imposed return was suggested by UNHCR to highlight the challenges that would result in involuntary repatriation (ibid).

A sustainable and viable alternative to repatriation is often local integration in the host country refugees first sought asylum in. Tanle and Tettey (2017) show that in protracted

refugee situations refugees are often ready for local integration as they are already engaged with the local community. Extenuating circumstances like Covid-19 when resettlement to developed countries was halted also underlined the importance of local integration as a viable durable solution that should be specifically prioritised in protracted contexts (Nizeimana et al, 2022). Nevertheless, local integration can often be hindered by the social context within the host community (Hynie, 2018). Even if a host country takes a step towards more progressive policies that can encourage refugee integration the legacy of stricter practices can hinder these attempts (Tulibaleka et al, 2022).

The last of the three durable solutions for refugees, is resettlement to a third country.

According to the UNHCR's (2011) Resettlement Handbook:

Resettlement involves the selection and transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection to a third State which has agreed to admit them-as refugees- with permanent residence status. The status provided ensures protection against refoulement and provides a resettled refugee and his/her family or dependants with access to rights similar to those enjoyed by nationals. Resettlement also carries with it the opportunity to eventually become a naturalized citizen of the resettlement country (p.9).

Resettlement serves three purposes. First, it is considered a tool that provides 'international protection and meet[s] the specific needs of individual refugees whose life, liberty, safety, health or other fundamental rights are at risk in the country where they have sought refuge' (p.3). Second, it is used alongside voluntary repatriation and local integration 'for larger numbers or groups of refugees' (ibid). Third, it is considered 'a tangible expression of international solidarity and a responsibility sharing mechanism, allowing States to help share responsibility for refugee protection, and reduce problems impacting the country of asylum' (ibid). It is important to note here the specific reference to naturalisation in the UNHCR's

description of resettlement, which directly links this form of refugeehood to a process whereby the eventual resolution of displacement is citizenship in the host country. This links to my findings on the experience of resettlement through VPRS.

Whilst the description of resettlement as a durable solution portrays resettlement as a very desirable option, usually it is the least likely and most exceptional option for most refugees. As I have mentioned in chapter 2, resettlement policies and the growing use of ‘vulnerability’ in the language of these policies, prioritises national security rather than international solidarity and humanitarianism, which adds to a securitisation framing of refugees as a threat rather than individuals with specific needs whose life is at risk (Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Ibrahim, 2005). I consider the impact of this securitisation frame on integration at various stages of this thesis.

Third sector organisations can notably provide the services necessary for a successful integration to the post-resettlement process. Significantly, the *Global Compact on Refugees* (UN General Assembly, 2018) and the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration* (UN General Assembly, 2019) underscore the importance of partnerships related to third sector organisations in the delivery of refugee protection. For example, one of the ‘guiding principles’ of the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration* is the ‘Whole of Society Approach’, which emphasises the importance of ‘broad multi-stakeholder partnerships’ (ibid, p.6). Similarly, the *Global Compact on Refugees* underlines ‘a multi-stakeholder and partnership approach’ (UN General Assembly, 2018, p.14) as a ‘key too[l] for effecting burden- and responsibility- sharing’ (ibid, p.12). Nonetheless, national policies often hinder third sector organisation attempts to provide refugees with services post-resettlement (Borzaga et al, 2016). In chapter six I show how third sector organisations in the North East of England respond to the challenges national policies have brought to the region to provide integration support, to refugees, post resettlement. Through this I contribute to literature

showing how the socio-economic conditions of a host community can significantly impact how successful the integration of refugees can be (Darling, 2016; Holmqvist et al, 2022). In the sections that follow I discuss refugee resettlement in the context of the UK. I also outline the socio-economic context of the host communities in the North East of England where this research focuses.

Refugee resettlement in the UK

The UK has a long history of immigration flows. Since the Refugee Convention came into force in 1951, the UK has been an important contributor of refugee protection operating various refugee resettlement schemes during times of crisis.

Before the UK introduced resettlement schemes that resemble those currently in place like the recently completed VPRS, the UK offered quota schemes for specific ethnicities considered to be at high risk during a particular conflict ongoing at the time. Notable quota schemes that were introduced before resettlement schemes were officially established included the following groups: Ugandan Asians fleeing Uganda in 1972 (Kuepper et al, 1976), Indo-Chinese refugees fleeing Vietnam from 1979 to 1995 (Barber, 2021; Helton, 1990) and Bosnian refugees fleeing the former Republic of Yugoslavia from 1992 to 1995 (Day and White, 2002; Robinson and Coleman, 2000). These schemes in their majority included predetermined numbers of people that would be accepted for protection, although the numbers were often adjusted depending on the escalation of the conflict.

In line with the changing attitude of the international community towards resettlement from a preferred durable solution to individual protection cases in 1985 and onwards (UNHCR, 2011), in 1995 the UK launched the currently ongoing Mandate Scheme whose aim is to resettle refugees with a close family member residing in the UK (Home Office, 2023).

With resettlement as a durable solution reconsidered and redefined within a broader focus by the international community in the early 2000s (UNHCR, 2011), in 2004 the UK introduced, alongside the Mandate Scheme, the Gateway Protection Programme. This was a quota refugee scheme for 750 refugees deemed especially ‘vulnerable’ annually by the UNHCR regardless of nationality, which ran until 2020 (Platts-Fowler and Robinson, 2011). Arguably, the Gateway Protection Programme was an amalgamation between the earlier ethnicity and conflict specific quota schemes and what would eventually become the VPRS and the schemes that followed it. This is evident in a few aspects of this resettlement model. First, we can observe the appearance of the term ‘vulnerable’ within the description of the scheme. Vulnerability in this instance is aligned with the definitions and categories set by the UNHCR at the time. As a result, in 2004 when the Gateway Protection Programme started, the most ‘vulnerable’ refugees as per the UNHCR Resettlement Handbook of the time are those who require ‘special arrangements’ (p.33) and may be elderly, disabled, medical cases, unaccompanied minors or women-at-risk. Notably, these categories are not framed as ‘vulnerable’ directly as is the case with the current use of these categories, but there is a suggestion that some may be ‘particularly vulnerable’ and would be part of the ‘contributing factors in determining whether resettlement is the appropriate solution’ (p.76). A second indication that the Gateway Protection Programme shares commonalities with VPRS is the focus on more intense support for the first 12 months following resettlement with a more hands-off approach afterwards, ‘in a bid to promote independence’ (Platts-Fowler and Robinson, 2011, p.1). In comparison to VPRS where local authorities are actively leading the practice of resettlement, support for the Gateway Protection Programme was provided by different agencies depending on the resettlement area. This included smaller faith-based organisations, larger voluntary sector organisations with longer history of supporting refugees, or a local housing association. For some areas local authorities were in partnership

with these organisations, for others they were not (ibid). ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision by the resettlement area was another commonality between the Gateway Protection Programme and VPRS and based on the evaluation report created by Platts-Fowler and Robinson in 2011 on the practice of the Gateway Protection Programme, suggests that similar challenges I identified in VPRS were present at the time. I go into more detail on this in the chapters that follow but accessibility to classes due to the location, lack of coordination and demand outstripping supply seem to be common problems refugees expressed when trying to access ESOL provision in their areas.

In 2012/2013, the growing humanitarian crises, especially in the Middle East and Africa, caused resettlement needs to exceed the 86,000 positions already made available by Australia, Belgium, Germany, Hungary and Spain (UNHCR, 2013). Indeed, for 2014, UNHCR (2013) had estimated that global resettlement needs reached 691,000 persons; this approximation was separate from the potential resettlement needs of refugees from the 2011 Syrian conflict, who were fleeing to the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt and Iraq. As a response to UNHCR's 2014 global resettlement needs, in January 2014 the UK launched the VPRS, which over a three-year period, aimed to provide sanctuary to several hundred 'vulnerable' Syrians (UNHCR, 2018). In September 2015 the scheme expanded to resettle 20,000 more of the most 'vulnerable' Syrians fleeing the conflict by 2020. To make the scheme more accessible, in July 2017 its scope expanded even further, beyond the Syrian nationality and until its completion resettled the most 'vulnerable' refugees who fled the Syrian conflict in Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon (UNHCR, 2018). The VPRS was to run separately and in parallel to the Mandate Scheme and the Gateway Protection Programme which were providing refugee protection to individuals not connected specifically to the Syrian conflict.

For an individual to be resettled through the VPRS, it is required that they have legal or physical protection needs; are survivors of torture or violence; have medical needs; are a woman or girl at risk; need family reunification; are a child or adolescent at risk; lack foreseeable alternative durable solutions. We can thus see that the policy of VPRS has directly implemented the language used by the UNHCR's recent versions of the Resettlement Handbook. At the time of writing the VPRS and the Gateway Protection Programme have ended and have been replaced by the UK Resettlement Scheme which at a first glance looks to have inherited the characteristics and practice of the VPRS but at a larger scale. According to the Home Office (2023) the UK Resettlement Scheme is a:

[...] global resettlement scheme [...] open to vulnerable refugees around the world.

Individuals coming through this scheme are assessed and referred by the UNHCR according to their criteria, which is based on people's needs and vulnerabilities.

This statement shows a reliance on the UNHCR resettlement criteria as it was the case with the Gateway Protection Programme and the VPRS, to define vulnerability, indicating how the responsibility for that process passes from the state to the UNHCR. My thesis in its majority focuses on the responsibilities that lie within the state, and specifically the responsibilities that are passed on to the region and to local government. However, I also show the pathways that vulnerability as an idea has taken through the different schemes of resettlement that have been developed and how its use has developed as those schemes have become more defined and widespread. In the section that follows I discuss the North East of England and the socioeconomic conditions that have shaped the region.

Austerity, Neoliberalism and the North East of England

(a) The North East of England as a deprived region

I chose to focus geographically on the North East of England due to the socioeconomic conditions in the region and its important role with the VPRS and resettlement process. The North East was the region with the largest share of VPRS refugees relative to population when the scheme was first introduced. What further sets the North East apart as a case study of the implementation of the VPRS is the context of multiple deprivation within which protection operates. This allows me to see how multiple forms of vulnerability intersect and give rise to political dynamics around the implementation of the scheme.

The North East has been rendered one of the most deprived regions in England. In the late nineteenth century, the North East was a centre for shipbuilding and mining, and up until the 1920s the region was highly attractive to migrants, and particularly Scottish and Irish migrants in search for relatively secure employment (Renton, 2007). However, the deindustrialisation of the mid 20th century, caused a decline in the economic dynamics of the region, with the end of the century shrinking the ship industry to a minimum and ceasing all coal mining (Flug and Hussein, 2019). In recent years the North East has seen a drastic increase in food banks, pressuring further already strained local authority budgets, whilst governmental austerity cuts have also reduced the financial support provided to third sector organisations, such as those supporting women's rights or preventing domestic violence (Flug and Hussein, 2019). Based on the 2019 *Index of Multiple Deprivation*, Middlesbrough and Hartlepool are amongst the 20 local authority districts with the highest proportion of neighbourhoods in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods in England, whilst Northumberland and Gateshead are amongst the 10 local authorities with the largest percentage point increase in deprived neighbourhoods since 2015 (Ministry of housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019). Moreover, compared to the UK average of 14.3%, the percentage of households in the North East that are workless is 20% (Official Labour market Statistics, 2019). Finally, data from Public Health England (2019) indicates that the

local authority of Stockton-on-Tees has the highest geographical health inequalities in England for both women and men. Despite the levels of deprivation and inequality evident in the region, in 2015 the North East resettled one of the largest proportional refugee populations in the country through the VPRS, standing in stark contrast to wealthier regions like London or the South East (Watson, 2019; Home Office, 2018; Statista, 2018).

For these reasons, it was important that I focused on the North East to explore the implications deprivation can have on our obligations to cure injustice and suffering and the forms of solidarity that emerge as a result. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, humans have created ‘social institutions (especially political, familial, and cultural institutions)’ (Turner, 2006, p.26) to protect themselves and their ontological vulnerability against the instability of the world. As a result, host communities and their social institutions are expected to act as protectors of vulnerability, or spaces where those framed as ‘vulnerable’ can find stability. Fotaki (2021) highlights that in Europe, solidarity in the context of austerity has been used as an economic-technical concept with fragile normative commitments that enhance inequalities at the EU borders. In the North East of England deprivation has mostly been a result of the austerity cuts implemented by the neoliberal policies Conservative governments have been enforcing in the last 15 years. Thus, it is important to examine to what extent the deprivation created by neoliberal austerity in the North East creates imbalances in the attempt of social institutions providing stability to resettled refugees and what implications this may have on the notion of solidarity and individuals’ vulnerability.

(b) Neoliberalism as a solution

Neoliberalism as a right-wing ideology against the welfare state and for free markets (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite et al, 2021), initially emerged as an answer to the 1930s global crisis of liberalism. In 1947, the Mont Pelerin Society’s (MPS) neoliberals worried that economic

planning would threaten the free and competitive nature of markets which stood at the core of individual liberty. As a result, the neoliberals suggested that the state should rethink its purpose into creating and upholding markets and competition rather than going back to the laissez-faire approach of liberalism (ibid). For this thesis I take neoliberalism to be a:

Theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey, 2005, p.2)⁸.

In this instance, the state has the responsibility to create the market in areas where it does not exist and in areas where a market is in place, to construct an institutional framework that would encourage the advancement of such an economic practice. This includes arranging any legal, military, police or defence mechanisms that would inflict a guarantee of the smooth operation of the market. Besides these responsibilities, the state should not interfere (ibid).

Several politicians sympathetic to the theory of neoliberalism, adopted and translated in the 1970s the ideology into policymaking (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite et al, 2021). This would delegitimise the social democratic norms embraced in the 1930s and 1940s. The UK, alongside the United States were at the centre of the application of this ideology (ibid).

A main critique of neoliberalism connects the ideology to capitalism (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite et al, 2021). Following a Marxist perspective, Duménil and Levy (2011) for example, view neoliberalism as ‘a class and imperial strategy’ (p.2) from the 1970s onwards, that transfers wealth to those who are already wealthy disregarding the fate of those belonging in lower classes. They argued that neoliberal ideas promoted amendments to the handling of

⁸ Scholars today recognize that there are three main schools of neoliberal thought, the Chicago School associated with Milton Friedman, the German ordo-liberals and the Austrian School associated with Friedrich Hayek, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss these in detail.

capitalism and the reinstatement of profitability. In fact, the 1970s underwent significant institutional change, as businesses, which were under restraint until then sought to overturn the institutional order to their benefit (Blyth, 2002). As a result, power was no longer with national states, but transnational companies (Strange, 1996). Nevertheless, such a strategy was unsustainable, leading to a ‘crisis of neoliberalism’ (Duménil and Levy, 2011, p.1). Such a crisis is also identified by Glyn (2008), who argues that the late 1960s and 1970s underwent a ‘crisis in profitability’ (p.56) that caused key shifts in the political economy of the time.

Michel Foucault views neoliberalism as inaugurating a ‘new type of rationality’ (Foucault, 2008, p.20) that governs not only politics and policy, but also human subjectivities, identities and everyday life (ibid). In this reality, the norm is a ‘generalised competition’ (Dardot and Laval, 2013, p.4) that

calls upon wage-earning classes and populations to engage in economic struggle against one another; it aligns social relations with the model of the market; it promotes the justification of ever greater inequalities; it even transforms the individual, now called on to conceive and conduct him-or herself as an enterprise (ibid).

As a result, this understanding of neoliberalism is not just about the political economic practice highlighted earlier in this section but its ability to integrate into ‘the recesses of kinship [...], citizenship [...], mind and body [...]’ (Freeman, 2011, .173). Cognizant of this understanding, in chapter nine I will show how the generalised competition and entrepreneurial approach to the self is internalised by refugees resettled in the North East of England.

In the UK, neoliberalism was a project that followed the welfare state reforms post-World War Two. These reforms were based on the *Social Insurance and Allied Services* report written by William Beveridge in 1942 to boost the conditions of the working class in the

country. Beveridge's report (1942) identified five 'giants on the road of reconstruction' (p.6): 'Want', 'Disease', 'Ignorance', 'Squalor', 'Idleness' (ibid). Arguably, these were aspects of vulnerability that were endemic to the UK population. A series of policies were created in response to these vulnerabilities. For example, the National Insurance Act in 1946 was addressing 'Want' and provided pensions and benefits amongst others, to those who found themselves unemployed and unable to work due to illness or disability (Robson, 1947). Another example is the National Health Service Act of 1946 that was committed to alleviating 'Disease' and would provide a free and universal healthcare system available to all (Greener and Powell, 2021). Moreover, the Education Act of 1944 would tackle 'Ignorance' by making secondary education compulsory but free to everyone up to the age of 15 (Hart et al, 2016). Additionally, the New Towns Act of 1946 would address 'Squalor' by creating new towns to alleviate the cramped living conditions in urban areas to provide communities with a balanced life (Ward, 2022). Finally, to address 'Idleness' industries such as those of coal and steel, as well as the railway system, were nationalised to provide stability to employment (Etherington, 2020). The formation of the welfare state also supported an increase in trade unions with membership peaking in the 1970s (Hyman, 1989).

Arguably, these policies exemplify the social institutions Turner (2006) speaks of which humans create to protect themselves and their ontological vulnerability, against the instability of the world. In this instance, the Beveridge report can be seen as an 'ethical aspiration to overcome these destabilising conditions to, ideally, mitigate the precarity of Others' (Lemke, 2016, p.17), where 'Others' could be identified as the working-class people towards whom the Beveridge Report was mostly geared. The policies that followed the Beveridge report underscores that vulnerability in the UK post-World War Two was thought to be rooted in poverty, illness, disability and lack of opportunity in education.

Nevertheless, as Turner predicted, these institutions are unstable 'and cannot work without

effective leadership, political wisdom, and good fortune to provide an enduring and reliable social environment' (2006). As a result, the economy of the welfare state suffered with structural weaknesses which led to the failure of economic planning and resulted in a severe economic crisis in the mid 1970s (Etherington, 2020). This led to 'increasing unemployment, social and spatial inequality and poverty' (ibid, p.48). As a bail-out condition by the International Monetary Fund the Callaghan government (1976-1979) enforced cuts to public spending; an action that narrowed the advantages initially offered by the welfare state and highlighted the significance of the market and the private sector (ibid). This paved the way for the Thatcher government and its election in 1979 which launched austerity cuts which were deeply rooted in neoliberalism (Brenner et al, 2010). In fact, Thatcher's government was considered a pioneer of neoliberalism who slowly experimented and infused the neoliberal doctrine into UK policy (Vassilev et al, 2016).

According to Mulvey and Davidson (2018) neoliberalism's successful incorporation in the government's strategies was based on the limitations imposed on the power of organised labour. Thatcher's experimentation and immersion in the neoliberal doctrine was evident in Trade Union legislation that aimed to diminish the power of organised labour. This legislation halted state aid to industries whilst sustaining high interest rates to purposefully enable mass unemployment. The aim of this strategy was to decrease, for a temporary period, Britain's demand for migrant labour (ibid). The legislation also restricted the right of Trade Unions to engage in industrial action, with the biggest confrontation between state backed employers and unionized workers being the strike of the National Union of Miners in the UK between 1984 and 1985 (ibid). In turn, the government established in areas with small history of unionization, new industries, with the aim of preventing new unions from being created (ibid). The victorious disempowering of organized labour was combined with policies that favoured the privatization and outsourcing of state-owned industries and a major

reorganization of the welfare state (Etherington, 2020). These processes of union weakening and deindustrialization had a major impact on the North East and particularly its mining industry, which produced high levels of poverty and a weak social state which was impacted further by austerity.

The New Labour government elected in 1997 and led by Tony Blair promised a change from the neoliberal path set by Margaret Thatcher. Nevertheless, whilst significant changes in policy did occur, Blair's government continued with a neoliberal approach to economics and social policy (Etherington, 2020). For example, neoliberalism is seen in the government's decision to grant the Bank of England policy independence (Burnham, 2014). Another example was the New Deal for the Unemployed, which aimed to support individuals back into employment but also had the power to withdraw any welfare benefits if acceptable employment was refused (Etherington, 2020). Moreover, local authorities were subjected to a constant performance audit enforced by Local Area Agreements originally initiated by the previous Conservative governments but maintained by Blair's government which prevented local authorities' ability to support deprived communities due to cuts to public funding (Cochrane, 1993, Etherington, 2020).

(c) The 2008 austerity cuts and the implementation of VPRS

The government's approach became even stricter with the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 with the first austerity measures introduced by the Brown administration in late 2008 to discipline the market (Bond, 2009; Brennel et al, 2010). David Cameron's austerity programme that aimed to guide the UK to a new 'age of austerity', led to even tighter measures in 2010 (Summers, 2009). Amongst the cuts made was governmental funding to local authorities which throughout the austerity programme period was reduced by 49.1%. It is also estimated by the Private Institute for Fiscal Studies that the most governmental cuts were experienced by local authorities who depended on funding the most (National Audit

Office, 2018; Smith et al, 2016). These cuts affected significantly the spending power of local government, an approach that proved detrimental to the poorest and most marginalised in the community (Hastings et al, 2017). Notably, local governments' socioeconomic conditions varied substantially across the country with regards to political control, local tax base, funding, assets, fiscal resources and service needs (Gray and Barford, 2018), meaning that the cuts would have uneven effects across different local authorities. As a result, local government learnt to redesign its services using more creative approaches that prioritise 'socially productive relationships' (Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013, p.546) over 'heroic politics and big ideas' (ibid).

It is within this context that local authorities were presented with the VPRS and were asked to implement its stipulations. Participation in the scheme was voluntary and areas new to refugee resettlement were encouraged to participate after advising them to consider the support and infrastructure that would be required to care for the refugees resettled in their area (Home Office, 2017). Once local authorities volunteered, funding arrangements were available to aid the local authority implement the stipulations of the VPRS. The funding arrangements were outlined as the following:

The first 12 months of a refugee's resettlement costs are fully funded by central government using the overseas aid budget. The Government has also provided an additional £10m ESOL funding to enhance the English language skills of adults to improve their resettlement and integration experience and employability.

For years 2-5 of the scheme there is £129m of funding available to assist with costs incurred by local authorities providing support to refugees under the VPRS. This is allocated on a tariff basis over four years, tapering from £5,000 per person in their second year in the UK, to £1,000 per person in year five. There is also an exceptional cases fund to assist the most

vulnerable refugees. This is a substantial level of funding which enables local authorities to support these vulnerable people as they rebuild their lives in safe and secure surroundings, among supportive communities in the UK (Home Office, 2017, p.6).

Contributing to literature discussing the uneven effects of austerity, in chapter five I argue that for most local authorities in the North East, the VPRS stipulations came to be read as potential solutions to aspects of the deprivation and the disproportionate consequences of austerity they were experiencing. These solutions exemplify the creative approaches local authorities were forced to embrace because of the unequal impact caused by austerity.

Austerity in Context

(a) Vulnerability as dependency

In the political discourse on austerity, vulnerabilities like illness, disability and unemployment, became re-signified as dependency, which was then juxtaposed to the liberation of the economy. Shadow Chancellor George Osborne's speech from February 2008 to the Conservative Party is exemplary of the anti-dependency sentiment. Titled 'There is a Dependency Culture', '[h]e promised that these austerity reforms would end what he described as a "shameful" "dependency culture in Britain", "free up supply" (of capital and labour), "unleash billions of pounds", "restore the health of the public finances", liberate those "stuck on benefits" and "transform" the "life chances of millions of families"' (Tyler, 2020, p.4).⁹ Notably, this was enforced in 2010, when he was appointed as Chancellor of the

⁹ Note that I am using Tyler (2020) as a reference here instead of George Osborne's original speech because at the time of writing this speech had been permanently removed from the internet in a Conservative party-wide initiative to erase records of speeches and press releases from 2000 until May 2010 (Guardian, 13 Nov 2013, at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/nov/13/conservative-party-archive-speeches-internet>, last accessed 16 May 2025).

Exchequer, and was responsible for managing the government's budget until 2016. Cooper and Whyte (2017) argue that vulnerability was a focal point of assault at that time:

Where the state once acted as a buffer against social practices that put people at risk of harm and violence and provided essential protection for vulnerable groups, [...] the withdrawal of state support has the most devastating of consequences for vulnerable people. [...] Austerity policies have been designed in such a way that target the most vulnerable and marginal groups in society, hitting them harder than any other income group (pp. 4; 10-11).

Additionally, mainstream media played a significant role in communicating this discourse to the public, and constructing austerity as unavoidable (Basu, 2017). As a result, a system that was originally designed to embrace and support vulnerability following the aftermath of World War Two, was instead creating a

popularly accepted decoy reason for the impacts of neoliberal economic policies-rising unemployment, rising wealth inequality, shortages of housing, school places and so on. [Austerity] divides the population, pitting poor against poorer, making a united opposition more difficult to assemble (Mendoza, 2017, p.88).

Vulnerability, instead of being embraced, was now framed by media and politicians as dependency to excuse its persecution to the public (O'Hara, 2015; Tyler, 2020). This exemplifies Butler's discussion on the politics of framing and grievability. Framing has the capacity to assign value to lives differently, allowing media and politicians to determine whose life is grievable and whose is not. Vulnerability under the neoliberal regime is not a condition that elicits care, but instead elicits suspicion.

This is due to the transition of the understanding of vulnerability from an ethical aspiration to stabilise life conditions and mitigate the precarity of Others (Lemke, 2016), to a reality where precarity is further exacerbated, with no regards to the impact that this will have on human

dignity and equality. In fact, Amnesty International in a report on the state of the world's human rights during 2016, described this political discourse as 'powerful narratives of blame, fear and scapegoating' (2017, p. 13), where 'the idea of human dignity and equality' is 'under vigorous and relentless assault' (ibid.) A political discourse that targets vulnerability in this way, can result in practices of extreme dehumanisation (Tyler, 2020).

Part of the political discourse of blame and scapegoating was extended to immigration through the 'hostile environment'. The 'hostile environment' was coined by Theresa May in 2012, who at the time was the Home Secretary under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. There was no single document underpinning the clear definitions or aims of the hostile environment. Instead, it was integrated in several immigration rules and regulations, affecting sectors like health, housing and livelihood, with the aim as May emphasised, to create 'a really hostile environment' for irregular migration (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021; Webber, 2019). For example, under the 2016 'Right to Rent' policy, landlords had to check that new tenants have the right to be in the UK before renting the property to them, creating exclusions on who has access to safe housing and who does not, and distributing responsibility for border enforcement and suspicion to British citizens (McKee et al, 2020).

It is important to note that hostility was not first introduced in 2012 when Theresa May coined the term 'hostile environment'. Hostile legislation towards irregular migration is evident as early as the 1960s and 1970s with the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962 and the Immigration Act 1971. The Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962 was the first legislation that was introduced by the UK government 'to restrict Commonwealth citizens' entry into the UK' (Slaven and Boswell, 2018, p.1482). Before the introduction of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 irregular migration was not an area of concern and the flow of non-Commonwealth migrants considered 'aliens' (ibid) was already governed with a pre-existing system (ibid). Measures on irregular migration were tightened with the Immigration Act

1971, which criminalised ‘immigration offences such as overstaying visas and illegal entry’ into the country (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021, p.528). The increase in asylum claims towards the end of the 1980s led the UK government to introduce the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act of 1993 which was to help manage the asylum process (Stephens, 1998), whilst the Asylum and Immigration Act of 1996 particularly focused on establishing the criteria that could certify asylum claims ‘as bogus or without foundation’ (White, 1998, p.8). In 1997 when the New Labour government came into power under Tony Blair (1997-2006) and then Gordon Brown (2007-2010) a dual strategy to ‘manage migration’ was introduced (Lewis et al, 2012; Mulvey, 2011). This strategy, on the one hand attempted with legislation such as the Immigration and Asylum Act of 1999 and the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act of 2002 ‘to deter asylum applicants by restricting safe routes of entry and separating “undeserving” asylum seekers through policies of dispersal, detention and destitution from “deserving” refugees’ (Lewis et al, 2012, p.87). On the other hand, it recognised ‘the need for certain migrant workers’ (ibid), becoming one of the first countries opening its labour market to the new European Union Accession countries in 2004 (ibid; Mulvey, 2011).

The policies of the ‘hostile environment’ have been criticised as particularly harmful. Firstly, the ‘hostile environment’ has been incubating Far Right and New Right ideologies of racial discrimination, intolerance and xenophobia, which disrespects the basic principles of human rights (Ikegwuruka, 2020). This has led to an environment of extreme uncertainty for many migrants who are afraid to use services in case they are arrested or deported (Griffiths and Trebilcock, 2022; Weller et al, 2019). This can exacerbate the lack of confidence and social isolation refugees, and asylum seekers already experience in the public sphere (Low and Shah, 2023). The ‘hostile environment’ has also been particularly harmful to communities living in the UK for decades, like the Windrush Generation, who were wrongly labelled illegal migrants and had to face devastating consequences such as deportation, as a result

(Gedalof, 2022). The Windrush Scandal revealed how harmful and discriminating the policies of the ‘hostile environment’ can be, deeming people as undeserving of British citizenship and residency rights (Benchebkroun, 2023). It also highlighted how these policies had often unintentional consequences and how a wider range of migrants than originally intended got drawn into enforcement and expulsion as a result.

The hostile environment is an approach still enforced today, and even more tightly. A recent example can be found in one of the speeches given in 2022 by the UK’s Home Secretary at the time, Suella Braverman. In October 2022, at a Conservative Party Conference she described it as her ‘dream’ and ‘obsession’ to see a flight take asylum seekers to Rwanda for processing and settling (Dearden, 2022). The UK’s hostile environment exemplifies what citizenship scholars have been highlighting about exclusion and inclusion (see chapter 2): that the way states have been using deservingness to define and divide populations has political and practical implications about who belongs to the body politic and who does not, and that these implications go well beyond formal binary statuses (citizen/non-citizen). The way the Windrush Generation has been affected by the hostile environment shows how these policies aim to categorise people considered by the government as unwanted, to the level of bare life, as defined by Agamben (1995), i.e. those excluded from the political sphere, unable to flourish, participate actively in the community and live a good life. In chapter nine I show how the VPRS complements such policies by contributing to the moral tension between ‘an ethics of life’ and ‘a politics of life’ (Fassin, 2018, p.75), leading to an exclusion from citizenship and an unequal treatment of lives.

(b) The impact of privatisation

A common practice within the austerity drive was for several government-supported services to be outsourced to private companies aiming to make a profit. Evidence of privatisation, amongst others, can be found in education, the prison service and immigration (Berry, 2016;

Mendoza, 2017; O'Hara, 2015). In *Systems of Suffering: Dispersal and the Denial of Asylum*, Darling (2022) outlines how in this government-wide austerity drive, in 2012, accommodation and support for the Asylum Dispersal System was privatised:

In 2012, the UK Home Office signed a series of six centralised contracts passing accommodation and support from a mixture of consortiums of local authorities, social housing associations, and private providers to the private contractors G4S, Serco, and Clearsprings. The COMPASS contracts were announced in the context of a government-wide austerity drive and became a means through which the Home Office sought to make 'efficiency savings' (p.11).

The privatisation of accommodation and support of dispersal meant that local government, namely local authorities, became less involved with the Asylum Dispersal System as they lost control over its services:

the loss of investment and staff that COMPASS effected for local authorities ensured that maintaining any role in dispersal was increasingly difficult. Losses of fiscal support contributed to a loss of political support for maintaining oversight of dispersal. This was because as staffing was reduced and funding lost, points of contact between asylum seekers and councils narrowed... '(p.104).

Whilst this allowed central government to gain power through greater centralisation of authority, this led to

a feeling of disempowerment among local authorities as a result of COMPASS, not only through the reduction in their frontline role in providing accommodation, but also through the lack of consultation that led to COMPASS in the first place...in feeling that privatisation was 'imposed upon them', local authorities shared a frustration that their views on dispersal were not taken on board, and that their expertise in running dispersal was side-lined in favour of

private contractors who were offering a cheaper, but less experienced, model of provision (p.95).

Arguably, the privatisation of most of the services associated with the Asylum Dispersal System meant that in 2012 local authorities lost most of their involvement and control within the UK refugee system. This is because local authorities in 2012 were not particularly involved in resettlement schemes. There were two main schemes running alongside the Asylum Dispersal System in 2012. The Mandate Resettlement Scheme launched in 1995¹⁰ and the Gateway Protection Programme launched in 2004. On the one hand, for the Mandate Resettlement Scheme resettled refugees were accommodated and supported by a family member living in the UK. Therefore, the government did not design the scheme in a way that would be delivered in close partnership with local authorities. On the other hand, the Gateway Protection Programme was a ‘pioneering Home Office Scheme’ as a Guardian article of the time calls it, which even though designed to be delivered in partnership with local authorities, drew reluctant participation from local authorities (Travis, 2004).

A primary reason why local authorities may have been reluctant to participate in the Gateway Protection Programme are financial constraints. Local authorities, as I have mentioned earlier, faced many neoliberalism-rooted budget cuts since the 1970s that challenged their ability to contribute adequately to refugee integration. Pinson and Arnot (2010) for example, show that the Home Office policies on the educational integration of refugee students at the time, did not adequately fund such plans. As a result, even if the Gateway Protection Programme offered some funding for the support of refugee integration, this was limited to a specific amount of time and did not consider the longer-term needs of the local authority in providing the support.

¹⁰ The Mandate Resettlement Scheme when launched in 1995 up until 2021 was called the Mandate Refugee Scheme.

Moreover, the Gateway Protection programme was introduced at a time when the New Labour government in power, was establishing a general body of policies designed to deter asylum seekers and refugees from entering or staying in the UK (Shabi, 2019). Repatriation, either voluntary or forced was a key area of this policy, designed to relieve strain on the welfare system and, in public discourse terms, to appease the public that was increasingly becoming anti-immigrant (Blitz et al, 2005). Arguably, local authorities were reluctant to participate in the Gateway Protection Programme due to the negative social perceptions about immigrants. Jones (2001), who conducted research on the impact of immigration control on young people just before the founding of the Gateway Protection Programme, found that local authorities' inadequacies in immigration provision were discriminatory and significantly affected by the public's negative framing of immigrants. This suggests that local authorities who were already providing support to refugees through other schemes of resettlement or asylum dispersal were significantly affected by the overall negative sentiment on immigration that was being fostered since New Labour came into power and were demoralised from participating in the Gateway Protection Programme. Similarly, it is possible that this discouragement was spread to local authorities with no previous experience in refugee support, who would not want to upset their constituents. Notably, at the time serious violence and risks around asylum dispersal were at the centre of media headlines, contributing to local authorities not being too keen to get involved into refugee resettlement regardless of the experience they had with refugee provision (Coole, 2002). As a result, by 2012 only 18 local authorities across the UK had participated, with Middlesbrough being the only North East local authority that participated (McKenzie, 2008; Sim and Laughlin, 2014).

Despite the ongoing hostility towards immigration local authority attitude in resettlement involvement changed dramatically in 2014 when the VPRS was launched. Government statistics show that between 2014 and 2021 when the scheme was in place, 332 local

authorities participated (Home Office, 2019). This is a striking difference to the 18 local authorities that participated in the Gateway Protection Programme in 2012, which interestingly, the VPRS had been modelled on. Figure one shows the number of local authorities participating in the VPRS per year of operation, whilst figure two shows the sum of persons resettled annually per UK region.

In chapter five I draw from the austerity context discussed in this section to show the diverse landscape of experience of local government within the North East and their approaches to the VPRS.

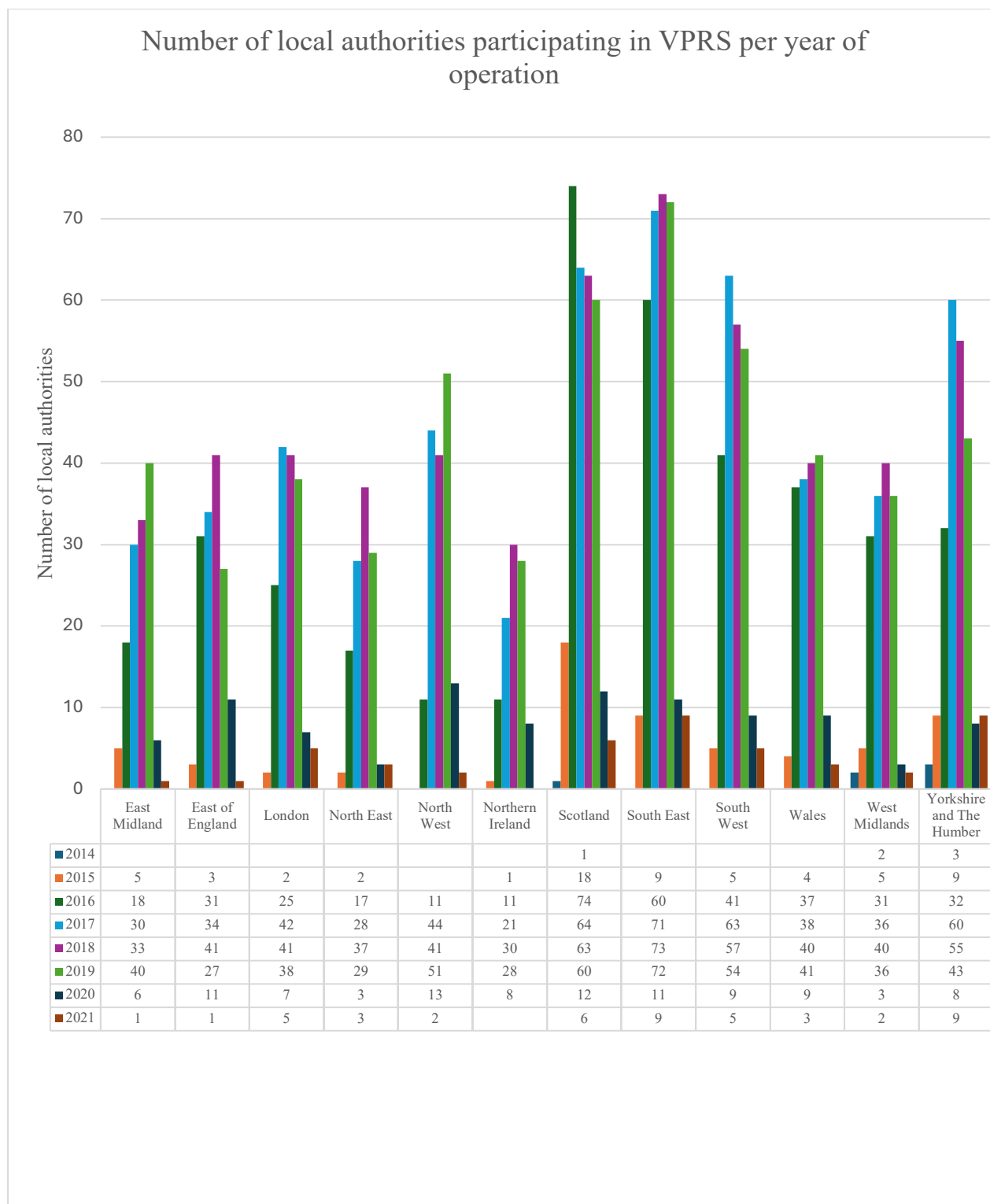


Figure 1: Number of local authorities participating in the VPRS per year of operation

***Analysed from data retrieved from the Home Office (2019a)**

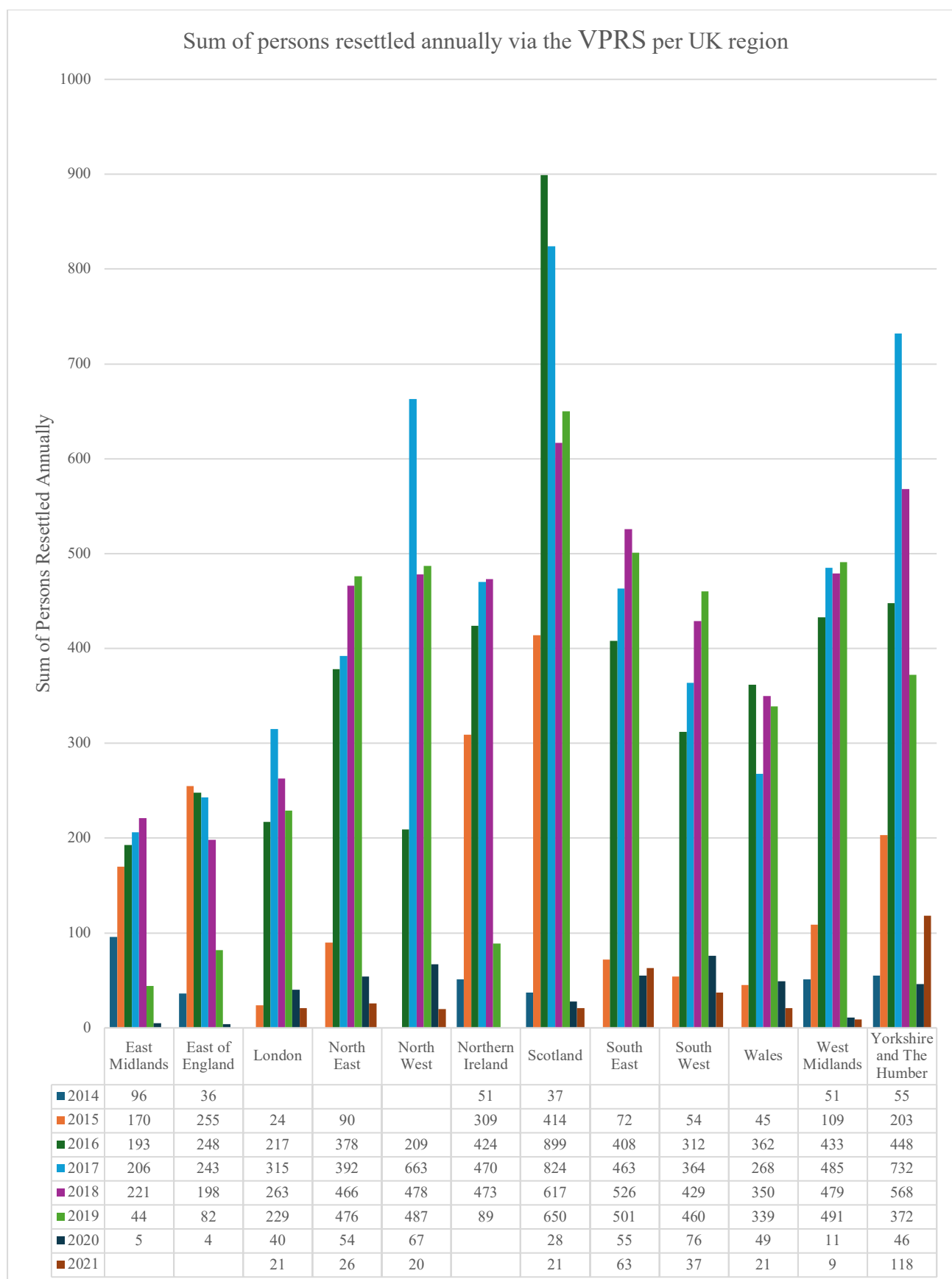


Figure 2: Sum of persons resettled annually via the VPRS per UK region

*Analysed from data retrieved from the Home Office (2019a)

VPRS and the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe

The diverse approach to the enactment of the VPRS is also shaped by the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ and the approach to solidarity that was evident at the time. What came to be called the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 entailed many refugees entering Europe through regular and irregular routes in 2015 fleeing the conflicts in Syria and Libya and the political instability in Afghanistan, Eritrea and Iraq (Castelli Gattinara, 2017; Jorgensen and Agustín, 2019). More than being a crisis of numbers however, scholars have argued that this was primarily a ‘crisis of legitimacy’ (Castelli Gattinara 2017, p.327) for European politics.

Bauder (2016), for example, argues that the term ‘crisis’ is caught in the contradictory nature of Germany’s immigration politics, which on the one hand is used to speak against immigration but on the other utilised to protect and welcome refugees.

Jorgensen and Agustín (2019) emphasize how nation states and the European Union have not been able to present practical and long-term solutions to the crisis, highlighting that in effect, the crisis Europe was experiencing alongside that of legitimacy, was a crisis of institutionalised solidarity; the incapability of member states as existing institutions within the European Union to develop or support forms of solidarity that would provide substantial refugee protection.

Crawley (2016) says that

the migration ‘crisis’ is not a reflection of numbers per se but rather that it is symptomatic of a wider geopolitical crisis which reflects profound and longstanding differences between EU member-states and across the wider European region...[it is a phenomenon that highlights the] unwillingness and seeming inability of politicians and policymakers to engage with an extensive body of evidence on the dynamics of migration and to harness their combined

political and economic resources to address the consequences of conflict and economic underdevelopment elsewhere (p.14).

The UK contributed both to the crisis of legitimacy and of institutionalised solidarity, itself being a member state of the European Union. However, the UK has also been feeding on Europe's crisis of legitimacy to serve its own political agenda. This is evident in how the UK media used the word 'crisis' to report on the series of events occurring in 2015. Dubbing it first as a 'Mediterranean migrant crisis' in May 2015, helped to 'firmly [locate] the event as happening away from the UK so that this is not a national issue' (Goodman et al, 2017, p.108). But by July 2015 the 'Mediterranean' changed to a 'Calais migrant crisis', to highlight how the crisis is now closer to the UK's borders. In August 2015, it shifted to 'Europe's migrant crisis', making the crisis 'pan-European' and 'not a crisis for the refugees, but for Europe' (ibid, p.109), portraying Europe as a victim experiencing difficulties imposed by migrants. Linking this to the crisis of legitimacy, the UK media created a narrative around Europe's legitimacy and its inability to control migrants entering its borders. This is to separate the UK, its politics, and borders from the failing European Union from which at the time it was also trying to separate, through Brexit. In this context, the photographs of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian boy who died attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea in September 2015, caused a significant discursive shift in Europe towards the wording 'refugee crisis'; a 'much more deserving and morally acceptable category' (ibid, p.110). Alan Kurdi albeit temporarily, and in direct reference to his death, influenced policies with a more 'open-door approach' (Adler-Nissen et al, 2019, p.76), which a year later would change yet again 'to an attempt to stop refugees ever arriving in Europe' (ibid, p.77). The most striking example was the agreement between Turkey and the European Union in March 2016, which effectively, stopped migration from Turkey to the Greek islands (ibid). As Ticktin (2016) says, '[t]he photo gave the 'migrant crisis' a new face: innocence. It shame[d] Europe into action'

(p.258). The image, in other words, ‘provoked a remarkable and transnationally articulated demand for responsibility’ (Perl and Strasser, 2018, p.508), which nevertheless, was temporary because solidarity was rooted in weak normative commitments that were easily separated from their social or ethical dimensions (Calhoun 2002; Calhoun 2003; Calhoun 2005; Fotaki, 2021). The way we frame certain discourses can affect significantly individuals’ and states’ reactions and solidarity, making lives grievable. In this case, grievability was temporary, appearing momentarily in the shift from masses in ‘crisis’ to the tragedy of a named individual child, to be retracted once more for the image to be used in a discourse of exclusion.

It is in this context, that in September 2015 the European Union, arguably acting on reflexes of shame and responsibility, launched the Refugee Relocation Scheme, suggesting that 160,000 refugees of those who arrived at the hotspots in Greece and Italy, be relocated to other member states. However, the scheme failed, primarily due to lack of participation from member states and was terminated in September 2017 (Martin, 2017; Jorgensen and Agustín, 2019). In part, this highlights the temporariness of responsibility and shame underscored above. The UK was one of the several member states of the European Union who refused to participate in the Refugee Relocation Scheme (Crawley, 2016). Instead, in September 2015 the UK opted to expand the existing VPRS which it had already launched in January 2014 as a response to UNHCR’S 2014 global resettlement needs and was resettling Syrian refugees who fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt and Iraq (UNHCR, 2018; UNHCR, 2013). As Prime Minister David Cameron (2015) put it at the time, through the VPRS the UK would ‘continue to show the world that this is a country of extraordinary compassion always standing up for [their] values and helping those in need’. Ironically, the UK’s show of extraordinary compassion was done separately to the European Union and the hotspots in Greece and Italy that required solidarity at the nation-state level (as it was aimed to resettle

refugees from outside Europe). The significance of the UK's failure to participate in the European Union's Refugee Relocation Scheme is two-fold: first, it contributed to undermining confidence in the European Union and its ability to deliver political solutions; second, it decisively twisted the lens on migration as being the problem (Crawley, 2016). The first was in line to what eventually solidified into the Brexit agenda in the run up to the referendum that decided that the UK would leave the European Union. The second was in line with the UK's hostile environment as it was developed after 2012.

In these ways, the VPRS thus conceived and developed in a context of increasing anti-European discourse and migrant hostility. In this sense, the scheme was not a humanitarian policy borne out of compassion, as claimed by David Cameron but one that served two anti-migration agendas at once: against European migration and against third country refugees who fell outside the parameters of the VPRS the criterion of being affected by the Syrian conflict.

Civic solidarity and the VCS

If solidarity was lacking at nation-state level at the time, both in Europe and in bilateral links with the UK, it could be found within the VCS as a sudden boom of civic solidarity; initiatives practiced by civil society to include refugees and asylum seekers (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019). These initiatives took many forms, mostly under the discourse of solidarity which was constantly reported by journalists in their transnational news reportage on local responses to the 'refugee crisis' (Rozakou, 2016; Guma et al, 2019). This solidarity took several forms, materialising 'into initiatives such as organized hosting networks, language courses, food and clothes donations, legal assistance or rescue missions at the European borders' (Maestri and Monforte, 2020, pp.920-922). The initiatives were found in locations of

first reception such as Lesvos and Lampedusa as well as destination countries like the UK where refugees and asylum seekers had been resettled (Guma et al, 2019).

The VCS in the UK has a long history of initiatives caring for groups framed as ‘vulnerable’ alongside the state, or simply filling in the gaps for those deemed as ‘undeserving’. In fact, over the years the VCS’s work has contributed significantly to the development of health and welfare services, as well as campaigning and influencing welfare policies (Knight, 1993; Kendall and Knapp, 1996). Until the late 19th century, the role of the state was restricted to poverty relief, with the VCS at the forefront of providing social welfare (Milbourne, 2013). The first half of the 20th century saw an enormous growth of charity organisations with VCS becoming a safety-net of welfare which was also extended to previously neglected vulnerable groups (Milbourne, 2013; Kendall, 2003; Beveridge, 1948). The legislation introduced after World War Two following the Beveridge Report secured universal rights to secondary education and healthcare, allowing the unemployed, sick and elderly, an uninterrupted safety-net of state benefits (Beveridge, 1948). This positioned the state in a prominent position of welfare provision diminishing the reliance on the previously VSC provided services. Nevertheless, VCS continued, alongside state provision, to develop radical work helping increase expectations of welfare (Milbourne, 2013).

However, as I have mentioned previously, the rise of successive UK governments from 1979 onwards saw massive cuts in welfare provision (Milbourne, 2013). These cuts eventually coincided with the UK’s hostile environment through which for more than two decades policymakers have been trying to reduce the number of economic migrants in the country, claiming that they disguised themselves as ‘disingenuous’ asylum seekers attempting to reach UK borders (Mayblin, 2017; Campbell, 2016). As the discourse that eventually congealed around ‘the hostile environment’ went, to prevent disingenuous asylum seekers from being ‘pulled’ into the UK by the country’s generous welfare benefits, from 2002 onwards the UK

placed restrictions on the benefits asylum seekers could access (Mayblin, 2017). At the time of writing, asylum seekers are entitled to £45 per week which represents around 16 per cent of the income of the poorest five per cent of UK households. To make the environment even more hostile, asylum seekers are also unable to enter the UK's labour market (Mayblin, 2017) meaning that a lot of people are left destitute. A growing number of charities in the UK were founded based on fighting destitution because of the changes in immigration legislation that restricted asylum seekers from welfare benefits and entering the labour market. An example is *Action Foundation*; a charity in the North East of England which began in 2007 by housing a single destitute asylum seeker. Today they run various projects to fight destitution and homelessness amongst asylum seekers and refugees, with 'Action Housing' and 'Action Letting' being examples of some of their most recent projects. Currently, projects such as those of Action Foundation are supported further by *The No Accommodation Network*; a network across the UK helping coordinate and join initiatives from charities such as Action Foundation 'through shared learning and resources, and by providing mutual support and encouragement' (NACCOM, 2023).

Poverty and destitution amongst asylum seekers are accepted by the government as a social problem, and the UK up until its exit from the European Union was bound by the *Council Directive 2013/33/EU laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection* to avert such conditions. Nevertheless, asylum seekers' essential living needs were not a public priority, disincentivising the state from providing to them (Mayblin and James, 2018).

The combination of cuts to welfare provision and hostility towards asylum seekers, constitute a case of bordering that is 'no longer about the separation of an "outside" from an "inside," but about creating hierarchies, zones, and boundaries within which people are regulated in different ways in shared space' (Dajani, 2021, p.64). This creation of hierarchies, zones and

boundaries through welfare restrictions exacerbates the precarity of refugees and asylum seekers, condemning them to a bare and ungrievable life. The reason behind these restrictions is because states and society are not only reluctant to recognise that everyone is inherently vulnerable but also use the term ‘vulnerability’ to protect some and not others and even enhance and exacerbate that vulnerability in cases that they render fit. This is because states and society assume that those they consider ‘vulnerable’ require more care than the ‘average’ person and that will burden the services provided, if any, by the state. As a result, specific groups of people like refugees are forced into the category of ‘especially vulnerable’ (Tronto, 1998, p.19) and responsibilities are often passed onto the VCS, who acts as a caregiver where the state does not, so that everyone else can live under the illusion that they have an ‘invulnerable autonomy’ (ibid). In chapter six I will show how the VCS in the North East of England filled in the role of caregiver from 2015 onwards.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined how ‘vulnerability’ has been integrated and defined in international policy of refugee protection. I highlighted that policy language around refugees and vulnerability is changing to a more direct and exclusionary tone that associates certain groups of people with ‘vulnerability’ rather than vulnerability being recognised as an inherent condition. I have underlined that the description of resettlement as a durable solution may portray resettlement as a very desirable option, but in reality, it is the least likely and the most exceptional option for most refugees. This is exemplified in the way refugee resettlement has become increasingly reliant on the direct and exclusionary tone of the policy language on vulnerability to organise its practices.

I also discussed refugee resettlement in the UK, outlining its contributions alongside the shifting priorities of the international community on resettlement and identifying the

significance of the VPRS within this timeline. I showed that the VPRS is an amalgamation of past quota schemes for specific ethnicities considered to be at high risk during particular conflicts ongoing at the time and the Gateway Protection Programme introduced in 2004 for refugees rendered especially ‘vulnerable’ regardless of nationality.

Following this, I discussed neoliberal ideology and the implications of austerity. In the UK, neoliberalism was a project that followed the welfare state reforms post-World War Two. I argued that the welfare state sought to address aspects of vulnerability that were endemic to the UK population at the time. However, in the 1970s a severe economic crisis snowballed a series of events that slowly established fundamental levels of inequality, poverty and unemployment across the UK. This peaked with the global financial crisis of 2008 and the round of austerity cuts introduced. In the political discourse of austerity, vulnerability became re-signified as dependency, which was then juxtaposed to the liberation of the economy. This reinforced the VCS’s role filling in the gaps for those the state deems ‘undeserving’. As a result, vulnerability, instead of being embraced, was framed by media and politicians as dependency to excuse its persecution to the public. Part of this persecution was extended to immigration through the ‘hostile environment’. Financial constraints within the austerity drive and the overall hostility around immigration affected significantly local authority responses to refugee protection who before the VPRS was introduced, were reluctant to participate in the Gateway Protection Programme. I note that local authority attitude in resettlement involvement changed dramatically in 2014 when the VPRS was launched, which was partly due to the ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015 and the notion of solidarity evident at the time, highlighting the importance of researching its enactment at the local level. I argued that what sets the North East apart as a case study for the implementation of the VPRS is the context of multiple deprivation within which protection operates. Whilst rendered as one of the most

deprived regions in England, the North East of England was the region with the largest share of refugees relative to its population.

Given this context, in this thesis I engage with the three actors at the heart of the application of VPRS (local authorities, VCS, and refugees) situated in the North East of England. The chapter that follows focuses on methodology and describes my research approach interviewing these actors.

Chapter 4-Researching Vulnerability

Introduction

The previous chapters have discussed the role of vulnerability as a concept in academic literature and in policy making on refugee reception. Researching vulnerability in refugee protection has meant that I not only engaged in critical appraisals on the policies relating to it, but also in rethinking my own conduct in interacting with individuals deemed ‘vulnerable’ and those involved in the rebuilding of their livelihoods. The key methodological questions I followed in preparation and during fieldwork were concerned with the type of methods that would be the most suitable to research vulnerability, as well as the ethical considerations and limitations of the chosen methods. That is, I was concerned with which method would be best to approach the three actors and how to probe their understanding of vulnerability in an ethical manner. Through this process, I became acutely aware of the importance of the concept of vulnerability as a parameter in the methodological research toolbox as a whole and not just in the context of my research project.

The term ‘vulnerability’ first appeared in the context of research ethics in the Belmont Report in 1979 which addressed ethical issues that may arise from medical research with human subjects (ten Have, 2015). At the time, vulnerability was discussed as a secondary consideration alongside a general framework on respect, justice and beneficence within research with human beings (ibid). Similar approaches to vulnerability can be identified in later ethical guidelines such as those of the 1991 Council for International Organisations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) (ibid). It was not until 2005 that the conception of vulnerability changed. This was through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and its adoption of the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, with Article 8, emphasising the need to respect human vulnerability (ten

Have, 2015). Since then, vulnerability was elevated to ‘a fundamental bioethical principle’ (Savaş et al, 2023, p.431) that expanded its scope of research beyond the medical towards its bioethical relevance in culture, the economy, the human existence, society and the environment (ten Have, 2015).

Today, as social science researchers, in most research that we do we are obliged to consider whether any of our participants belong to the groups of people framed as ‘vulnerable’ in normative ethical review processes and institutional frameworks. The discussion that follows is an account of my journey, the ethics and positionality on researching vulnerability in refugee resettlement during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a time when many people, not only from refugee backgrounds, were reassessing their own sense of embodied vulnerability and feelings of insecurity. I do not introduce new methods in researching refugee resettlement in conditions of crisis for this thesis. Nevertheless, the shift in the methods that I present will hopefully provide a deeper insight to our understanding of vulnerability.

Researching vulnerability in the North East of England

With the pandemic taking over Europe, it was not a surprise when the UK started announcing its first measures against COVID-19 in March 2020. At the time I was six months into my PhD and was preparing for a fieldwork which I naively thought I could begin in person that summer. My plan was to collect data through a more ethnographic approach; a methodology increasingly adopted by interdisciplinary research such as this, as a process of enabling knowledge that is in-depth, intimate, reflective, and experiential (Cleeford, 1986; Monteiro, 2018). Traditionally, ethnographic fieldwork is rooted in ideas of locality and the physical immersion of the researcher in a certain geographical area (Wittel, 2000) among a specific community where the ethnographer participates in everyday activities and shares in their

interlocutors' worldviews through such participant observation. Inspired by refugee ethnographies such as those of Peter Loizos ¹¹ and Liisa Malkki ¹², I similarly aspired to spend the next 12 months physically immersing myself 'in the field' using a variety of in person methods. In specific, I envisioned participant observation and in-depth informal interviews with members both of the VCS and the resettled refugees in the North East of England in environments such as NGO premises and activities relating to refugee welcome.

I intended to conduct this research in two phases. In phase one I planned to volunteer for three months at the *Befriending Scheme* in County Durham and the *North of England Refugee Service* in Newcastle. During this time, I would observe humanitarian workers, policy-practitioners, volunteers, and refugees to 'elucidate the linkages between the macrological and the micrological, between the enduring and structured aspects of social life and the particulars of the everyday' (Herbert, 2000, p.554). During this time, I would also be 'establishing rapport, selecting informants, [...], keeping a diary' (Geertz, 1975, p.15) in preparation for phase 2. At this preparatory stage I was also observing the online presence of county councils in the North East and how they advertised the narrative of resettlement online. I looked at their websites, their participation in local news, and their presence in social media. Whilst my intention was not to undertake 'hybrid ethnography', a combination of online and offline research methods, as discussed by Przybylski (2021), my brief observation of the 'online field' would offer an important introduction of the 'in-person' field I was preparing to enter.

I intended phase two to last nine months and use a combination of qualitative methods. This included formal interviews, in-depth informal interviews, and further observation and

¹¹ *The Heart Grown Bitter* (1981) and *Iron in the Soul: Displacement Livelihood and Health in Cyprus* (2008)

¹² *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology* (1995)

interaction of participants in their everyday in the North East of England. I aimed to formally interview 20-30 humanitarian workers, policy practitioners and other volunteers of the VCS in the North East. I also aimed to conduct in-depth informal interviews with five to seven refugee families resettled in the North East via the VPRS, who I then hoped to observe and interact in their everyday. I envisioned sinking into Geertz's (1975) characteristic 'thick description' (p.15), which only ethnographic methodology offers. I was planning to cultivate rapport with the humanitarian workers, policy practitioners, volunteers and refugee families by utilizing access through the two charities I would have previously volunteered with in phase one through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling (Biernacki and Wakdorf, 1981; Schimdt, 2007) is often criticised as a procedure where 'observations are necessarily interdependent' (Schimdt, 2007, p.86). Nevertheless, it is a common method for research in refugee populations as it helps researchers overcome sampling and recruitment challenges such as accessibility to the participant group due to locality or hesitation of participants to take part in research (Benson et al, 2011; Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2011; Kabranian-Melkonian, 2015). Snowball sampling has also been effective in examining organic social networks (Noy, 2008). As a result, interdependency is necessary to conceive the relationships between the members of the VCS and the community of resettled refugees in the North East of England. This would help flesh out both sides' experiences with the UNHCR vulnerability policies and their application through the VPRS in the North East.

To conduct the research outlined above, during the first six months of my doctoral study, I trained for in-person ethnographic fieldwork in refugee studies. I took migration and refugee studies modules to get a sense of refugee ethnographic content since my predominantly philosophical background had not exposed me sufficiently to theories of refugee research practice. I also took a methods module for doing research in politics and I studied guidelines developed specifically for refugee research. I undertook remote training on ethical fieldwork,

and I had one-on-one online sessions with my primary supervisor on doing ethical ethnographic research. This training provided me with knowledge that, when I would enter ‘the field’, I would feel confident conducting research on vulnerability. Despite the pandemic restrictions in place at the time, I was hopeful at that point that face-to-face interactions would have resumed in the following months.

However, my first attempt with the Ethics and Risk Committee at my department in May 2020 for in person interactions was understandably rejected with the following response:

Currently no ethics or risk approval is being given for research relying upon face-to-face interactions. You will, in discussion with your supervisor, need to find alternative ways to conduct research into your topic absent this type of interaction. It is unlikely these restrictions will be lifted by the university in the short-term (Fieldnotes Diary, 14 May 2020).

It was a period of national lockdowns in which all contact was legally constrained, so the possibility of ethnographic work was restricted by law as well as ethical considerations, leaving the Ethics and Risk Committee with no options but to advise against the one thing ethnographic fieldwork, traditionally at least, required: immersing myself physically ‘in the field’. Looking back to my field journal, words, and phrases that I kept repeating at the time of the rejection included: ‘terrified’; ‘demotivated’; ‘devasted’; ‘I need a new plan’ (fieldnotes diary, 14/5/2020). Uncertainty and heightened emotions are common reactions when preparing for, and entering the field, especially amongst early career researchers and doctoral students like me, who have little or no experience in the field (Burgess, 1982; Browne and Moffett, 2014; Darling, 2014). Nevertheless, as Howlett (2021) very accurately highlights, during the pandemic ‘researchers who conduct qualitative and ethnographic research through fieldwork have found themselves in particularly precarious positions in being forced to replace immersive in-person interactions with more hands-off approaches’

(p.5). In my case, I felt particularly precarious because not only was I forced to replace in person interactions with more hands-off approaches, but I also lacked the knowledge and training in conducting research absent of such interactions.

Planning a remote approach

Going back to May 2020, the pause put on face-to-face interactions meant my access to potential participants and their recruitment, was almost impossible. I had to come up with a new plan. As a result, I started emailing service providing organisations based in the North East to negotiate the possibility of a remote ‘longer term affiliation’ through which I hoped I would be introduced and eventually recruit participants who were resettled in the North East via the VPRS. However, the world was so numb with the confusion of the pandemic that for two months, every email I would send to organisations for initial introductions never got a response. At this point I felt that I was sinking deeper into the position of precariousness mentioned earlier:

I feel lost. And devastated. My supervisors have been extremely supportive but it's been 2 months since the Ethics and Risk Committee's rejection and I'm making no progress! I've been trying to contact every relevant organization I can find in the North East and none of them respond to my emails. Today, I even took the step and called. Again, no response. [...] In the rare occasion that they do pick up it is to say that their services are temporarily suspended and therefore cannot offer me any type of collaboration until the situation with the pandemic stabilizes. (Fieldnotes Diary, 15 July 2020).

Different services provided to refugees and asylum seekers temporarily suspending or slowing down the first few months of the pandemic was not unique to the North East. Similar patterns were identified by researchers in other places of the UK as well as Germany, France,

Turkey and Canada (Armstrong et al, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Nisanci et al, 2020; Tschalaer, 2020; Burns et al, 2022). Nonetheless, my wait was finally over towards the end of July 2020, when I got an email from the Regional Refugee Forum North East (RRF)¹³ saying that they would be happy to discuss my project and the idea of a longer-term collaboration. RRF is a non-service providing organization dedicated to influence policy and practice on decisions affecting the lives of the region's refugee and asylum seeker community. Initially, I was hesitant collaborating with a non-service providing organization since my pre-pandemic aim was predominantly the observation of humanitarian workers, policy practitioners and refugees in a space which provided refugee services. Whilst RRF would give me an insight on activism and humanitarian work in the region, I was uncertain whether it would offer me an understanding of the everyday exchanges between service providers and refugees themselves since service provision was not the aim of the organisation. Nonetheless, when none of the service providers were in position to discuss collaboration with me, I expanded my reach to organisations like RRF dedicated to change and debate.

I found RRF particularly interesting because of their focus on agency and empowerment.

RRF (2022) on its website describes itself in this way:

We are an independent membership organisation, created in 2004 by and for the region's Refugee-led Community Organisations (RCOs) to deliver the Collective Voice of the region's refugee and asylum seeker community. Our central aim is for this Collective Voice to influence Policy and Practice so as to promote equality and improve the lives of all refugees and asylum seekers living in the North East of England.[...] Our members are committed to taking the lead in civil society and being active agents for change. [...] They work together to create an authentic, collective, advocate voice. They speak up about the

¹³ RRF is happy to be named.

specific, recurring and shared challenges their communities face and offer practical recommendations for what would work best to tackle hardship and promote integration. We are not a service provider. We contribute to change through the collective action of our members, through promoting evidence based policy, through informing commissioning, and through influencing the way services are delivered by front line practitioners. We pursue a strategy of constructive engagement and collaborative working.

The RRF's mission reflects the neoliberal narratives of agency and empowerment I found across all three actors I focus on in this project. At the time I didn't see the parallels as I wasn't aware of the neoliberal approach organisations are inevitably made to partake in post austerity but phrases like 'taking the lead in civil society', 'being active agents for change' and 'tackle hardship and promote integration' hint towards key characteristics national government expects refugees to acquire post resettlement and organisations in the VCS are enforced to work towards to gain funding from the government.

Some fieldnotes from the day of the call before the call took place, highlight further the precariousness I felt regarding the project:

I am waiting for the representative's call with nervousness. The call is late. My hands are cold and sweaty, and I think I've forgotten everything I practiced saying: "Hello. Thank you so much for this opportunity...". What did I say I will say next??? Thank goodness I have my script in front of me. I cannot humiliate myself. This is my only chance to start my fieldwork. If this call does not go well, I have exhausted all my options... (fieldnotes diary, 22 July 2020).

Extending from my earlier comments on precariousness, the precariousness of the research project at this point numbed some of my critical reflexes I might have otherwise had; anxious

and excited, I eventually received the call, which proved very fruitful. This is how I recorded it in my notes on the day:

the meeting went well, and we spoke for a long time over the phone. I also successfully recited what I was practicing the whole week:

'My project is about the significance of refugee resettlement in the North East, which as a quite deprived region, has been at the forefront of governmental austerity measures. [...] by collaborating with your organisation I will be able to get a better feel how the policies work on the micro-level of the everyday experience both for people working with refugees and with refugees themselves, whom I am hoping to develop contact with eventually. [...] I am particularly interested in your Empowerment Project, additionally to your work on VPRS and was wondering if refugees of VPRS are involved in the Empowerment Project?... ' (ibid).

The representative was chatty, and we discussed refugee empowerment and agency a lot. I could see that they were eager to share with me their observations from the research they and their team were conducting:

'the VPRS is controlled by local authorities and there are no arrangements alongside the voluntary sector to support empowerment. The local authorities do not understand the value and process of empowerment. Through the scheme they create a cliental field and there is no attempt to develop agency. This is a huge problem in integration. Integration doesn't happen without empowerment. The RRF wants the local authorities to understand the value of empowerment. There are lots of issues and they are regional specific', I scribbled very quickly as she spoke (ibid).

I was surprised at her openness on critiquing the regional local authorities, but it was this openness that not only started shaping the initial outlook of my fieldwork but also landed me

a collaboration. This collaboration would feed into my thesis' aim to offer fresh insight into the potentials and limits of the VPRS in a way that will contribute to the support and bettering of the everyday living experience of refugees resettled in the North East through schemes of resettlement. Aspects of the collaboration would include benefits to both my doctoral project and to the RRF's overall aims.

It is worth noting here that I was heartened by the fact that they were critical of policy, as it endorsed my hypothesis at the time that local government was severely lacking in its approach to policy. Because of this I was keen to adopt their view of empowerment at face value. However, maturing in my position as a researcher, I now realise that the situation was more complicated than that. Local government, alongside other organisations in the region have become severely weakened by austerity and thus limited in their ability to be proactive in shaping refugee policy. Moreover, the language of empowerment and agency, as I will show in the chapters that follow, are deeply rooted in neoliberalism's entrepreneurial approach to the self which many young people resettled in the region are encouraged to adopt.

After finalising the specifics of the collaboration, I spent the rest of the summer adjusting my research proposal. I made two adjustments. One relating to framing, to reshape my research questions and aims to engage better with the regional insight I gained from my conversations with RRF and geared towards the needs of the collaboration. The other was practical: to introduce a research plan where the methods were flexible and easily adaptable to the unpredictability of the pandemic.

Outline of fieldwork

I negotiated for a two-phase fieldwork. In total, I conducted 43 interviews with the VCS, local authorities, resettled refugees and other relevant participants during these two phases¹⁴. In the subsections below I outline how these two phases developed and details of the participants. For clarity, separate tables are provided for refugees, the VCS, local authorities, and other relevant interviewees. Nevertheless, participants are assigned interview numbers sequentially (1-43) regardless of actor group starting from the VCS table. This numbering system was designed to provide consistency when referring to individual participants across the thesis and interview numbers do not reflect the order in which the interviews were conducted.

(a) Phase One

Phase one included 19 remote semi-structured interviews on Zoom or Teams with representatives of 12 registered charities and four initiatives of the VCS in the North East of England. Initial selection of participants from the VCS was their direct involvement with the VPRS or their link as overall service providers to refugees and asylum seekers in the North East of England. Because infrastructure in the region directly linked to refugees and asylum seekers was limited, I extended my conversations with charities and initiatives in the region that were not directly linked to refugee and asylum seeker provision, but their services were still used and found useful by the refugee and asylum seeker communities in the area. Here is an outline of the participants, the location, year registered as a charity, size and primary focus of work for the 12 registered charities I spoke with in alphabetical order:

¹⁴ Interviews 42 and 43 are with participants that do not belong to the main actor groups. I explain this in more detail at the end of this section.

Interview No.	Charity Name	Participants and Roles ¹⁵	Interview Date	Location of Charity	Year Registered as Charity ¹⁶	Size ¹⁷	Primary Focus of Work
1	Comfrey Project	Mary (pseudonym); officer	29 October 2021	Gateshead	2001	Very small	Refugees; asylum seekers
2	Communities Together Durham	Emma (pseudonym); officer	5 July 2021	Durham	2014	Very small	Poverty; social injustice; communities in the North East
3	Darlington Assistance for Refugees (DAR)	Fran; founding member and leading officer	27 October 2020	Darlington	2016	Very small	Refugees; asylum seekers
4	Durham City of Sanctuary	Joanna (pseudonym)-officer	21 April 2021	Durham	2016	Very small	Refugees; asylum seekers
5		Everly (pseudonym); volunteer	30 August 2021				
6	Friends of the Drop In (FODI)	Tom (pseudonym); officer	24 September 2021	Sunderland	2011	Very small	Refugees; asylum seekers
7	Hope Foundation	Hannah (pseudonym); officer	10 November 2020	Middlesbrough	1995	Small	Individuals with low skill level; loneliness; isolation
8	Jobs, Education, Training (JET)	Ali (pseudonym); officer	16 March 2021	Newcastle	2006	Small	Individuals with ethnic backgrounds
9		Afiya (pseudonym); officer	23 March 2021				
10	North East Churches Acting Together (NECAT)	Ava (pseudonym); officer	3 September 2021	Churches around the North East	2014	Small	Social injustice
11		Liz; volunteer	8 September 2021				
12	Northumberland County of Sanctuary	Ben; Secretary and Trustee	29 October 2020	Northumberland	2016	Very small	Refugees; asylum seekers
13	North of England Refugee Service (NERS)	Mohamed; leading officer	28 October 2020	Newcastle; Sunderland; Middlesbrough	1989	Small	Refugees; asylum seekers

¹⁵ To preserve anonymity, I do not specify what roles participants with pseudonyms held in the charity. Nevertheless, to distinguish between those in more formal roles (e.g. Fundraising Officer or the leadership team) from general volunteers, I refer to the former as ‘officers’. ‘Officers’ may have held paid or unpaid roles.

¹⁶ Charities ran as piloting projects/volunteer initiatives/integrated council services a long time before their year of registration. ‘Time’, in this instance, may vary from a few months up to four years.

¹⁷ I measure size based on the definitions used by Small Charities Data (2022). A charity is considered ‘small’ if it has an annual income of less than £1 million in annual income. Any charity above £1 million is considered large. Because of the smaller nature of the charities in the North East, for better reference, I will also be referring to ‘very small’ to any charities with annual income below £100,000. By ‘annual income’, I mean the latest financial statement that has been reported to the *Charity Commission for England and Wales* at the time of writing, which for most is data for the financial year ending 31st of March 2022.

14	Safer Communities (previously Safe in Tees Valley)	Graham; leading officer	5 November 2021	Durham	1996	Large	Crime reduction; promotion of community safety in the Tees Valley
15	West End Refugee Service (WERS)	Jessica (pseudonym); officer	7 January 2021	Newcastle	1999	Small	Refugees; asylum seekers

Figure 3: Overview of registered charities

The table shows that all these charities are local, operating either within the bounds of a single local authority or spreading out to the wider region of the North East of England. Six of these charities are ‘very small’, with an annual income of less than £100,000. The primary focus of work for these charities is refugees and asylum seekers, with some popping up primarily as responses to the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe. Five are ‘small’ with an annual income of less than £1 million but above £100,000. Some of these charities have been within the first examples of infrastructure in the North East of England, either for refugees and asylum seekers (for example NERS or WERS) or for other ‘vulnerable’ groups within the North East community (for example Hope Foundation or JET). The primary focus of work in this case is a bit more diverse but still concerned with issues related to vulnerability such as isolation, low skill level, difficulty in integration and poverty amongst others. Only one of these charities (Safer Communities) is ‘large’ with an annual income that goes over £1 million, was established in 1996 and is concerned with crime reduction and the promotion of safety in the local community.

I also spoke with participants representing the following four initiatives in the North East:

Interview No.	Name	Participants and Roles ¹⁸	Interview Date	Location of Initiative	Year Initiated	Primary Focus of Work
16	North East Solidarity and Teaching (N.E.S.T)	Bridget; founding member and officer	9 September 2021	Newcastle	2016	Refugees; asylum seekers; English language lessons
17	NUR Fitness	Aisha (pseudonym); officer	13 November 2020	Middlesbrough	2012	Health and fitness for BME women
18	The Forum	Rabia (pseudonym); officer	23 October 2020	Middlesbrough	2019	Female refugees; asylum seekers; loneliness; isolation
19	Women Can Do It	Nora (pseudonym); officer	2 November 2021	Middlesbrough	2014	Refugees; asylum seekers; migrants; loneliness; isolation

Figure 4: Overview of initiatives

It is important to note here how three of these initiatives are based in Middlesbrough; a local authority that did not participate in the VPRS. Nevertheless, Middlesbrough has been a significant asylum dispersal area in the North East through the years and was also the only local authority in the North East that participated in the Gateway Protection Programme up until 2012. As a result, there is a pre-established migrant community, including Arabic speakers, in Middlesbrough that has been proactively taking initiatives to make the lives of the growing community better. Women and their mental health have been a significant point of focus for all three initiatives which are concerned with tackling loneliness and social isolation of women within the migrant community. Indeed, even though both migrant and

¹⁸ To preserve anonymity I do not specify what roles participants with pseudonyms held in the initiative. Nevertheless, to distinguish between those in more formal roles (e.g. Fundraising Officer or the leadership team) from general volunteers, I refer to the former as 'officers'. 'Officers' may have held paid or unpaid roles.

host-country born women can undeniably face mental health problems, migrant women usually have an exacerbated mental health experience to those who were born in the country, due to the difficulties of accessing adequate professional and social support (Brydsten et al, 2019; Navodani et al, 2019). This explains why there is a reasonably high number of initiatives prioritizing women's mental health.

Phase one also included remote semi-structured interviews on Zoom or Teams with two councillors, five leading officers and three support workers of local authorities involved in the enactment of the VPRS. The table below summarises these profiles.

Interview No.	Name	Role	Local Authority	Interview Date
20	David (pseudonym)	Councillor	Gateshead Council	4 November 2021
21	Ryan (pseudonym)	Councillor	Durham County Council	11 November 2021
22 (joint interview)	Lucy (pseudonym)	Leading Officer	Durham County Council	30 September 2021
	Tom (pseudonym)	Leading Officer	Durham County Council	
23	Claire	Leading Officer	Gateshead Council	14 October 2021
24	Eleanor (pseudonym)	Leading Officer	Hartlepool Borough council	28 October 2021
25	Susan (pseudonym)	Leading Officer	Northumberland County Council	23 November 2021
26	Salwa (pseudonym)	Support Worker	North Tyneside	10 May 2021
27	Lindsay (pseudonym)	Support Worker	Durham County Council	21 October 2021
28	Anna (pseudonym)	Support Worker	North Tyneside	24 September 2021

Figure 5: Overview of local authority participants

It is important to note here that I only managed to conduct interviews with participants of five out of the eight local authorities that participated in the VPRS, as some local authorities were more responsive than others when approached for an interview.

Participants in phase one were given the option to remain anonymous if they preferred.

Participants who opted for anonymity were assigned pseudonyms, while those who consented to the use of their real names were identified as such.

(b) Phase Two

In preparation for Phase two I also had four ZOOM meetings with five Arabic speaking community activists in the North East introduced to me by RRF as part of our collaboration, which initiated my first interactions with resettled refugees in the region¹⁹. In turn, phase two included a series of what turned to be also remote, semi-structured interviews on Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp or mobile phone with 13 families resettled via the VPRS in local authorities of the North East. This included both male and female individuals of various age groups above the age of 18, who arrived in the North East through the VPRS at different stages of its five-year operation in the region and are now resettled in several local authorities of the North East. Some participants chose to speak to me together (husband and wife) and this is recorded in the table below.

Interview No.	Pseudonym	Local Authority Profile	Year of Arrival	Interview Date
29	Fatima	Trailblazer	2015	19 October 2021
30	Halima	No previous experience of refugee provision	2019	20 September 2021
31	Omar	Some experience with refugee provision/limited infrastructure	2016	21 September 2021
32	Asma	Some experience with refugee provision/limited infrastructure	2016	27 May 2021
33	Aleena	Some experience with refugee provision/limited infrastructure	2016	27 May 2021
34	Maryam	Some experience with refugee provision/limited infrastructure	2016	2 June 2021

¹⁹ Because these meetings were informal and activists did not consent for their details to be shared in any form, I will not be providing an overview of the activists.

35	Mahmoud	No previous experience of refugee provision	2019	4 September 2021
36	Hiba	No previous experience of refugee provision	2016	16 September 2021
37	Fadi	No previous experience of refugee provision	2018	20 September 2021
38	Iqra and Aziz	Trailblazer	2017	19 November 2021
39	Wajiha	Trailblazer	2019	22 October 2021
40	Fadi and Maira	Trailblazer	2020	22 October 2021
41	Rida	Trailblazer	2018	20 September 2021

Figure 6: Overview of resettled refugee participants

Because of Covid-19 there were some limitations to the access I had to families remotely.

This was because introductions were highly dependent on the Arabic Speaking Community Activists and the connections they had. For this reason, I did not manage to speak with refugees in all the local authorities that participated in the enactment of the VPRS.

Moreover, most participants were resettled in the North East in 2016. This is a further limitation owing to two reasons. First, even though fieldwork was conducted between 2020 and 2021 when most families resettled in the North East via the scheme had arrived in the country, Arabic Speaking Community Activists, in their majority had not had a chance to interact with newer arrivals as they are not affiliated with the participating local authorities and did not have information on the families in the region. Usually, their connections were made via cultural gatherings or word of mouth if families required help with accessing provision services in the instance where the local authority was not able to provide sufficient support. Because 2016 was the first year many inexperienced local authorities were participating in the scheme the enacting of resettlement was not perfect, and families sought

help from Arabic speakers already residing in the region. Such was the case of Abdullah²⁰ an Arabic Speaking Community Activist in the region who described the help he provided for refugees in the area at the time:

it's voluntary work. Nothing to charge. I did and I do all free of charge. These families have a support worker but it's easy for them to call me [...]. Saturday, Sunday, weekend, holidays, I always work with them. Support workers receive calls from 11am-1pm. But I am open 24 hours. As long as it's beneficial to [refugees] they call me and receive direct service (fieldnotes diary, 15 July 2021).

When asked how refugees found out that Abdullah could help them, he said:

by word of mouth. Families I have already been in touch with say this person can help you. You can call him. And that's how they find me (ibid).

A second reason why the year participants accessed were mostly resettled in 2016 was Covid-19. The Arabic speaking community activists did not have a chance to interact with newer arrivals because of lockdowns. Even if families expressed feelings of isolation and services by local authorities were halted, Arabic speaking community activists could not reach them due to the governmental restrictions that were imposed at the time. Abdullah described how a lot of the help he provided families required 'face to face interactions which during the strictest periods of lockdown were impossible'.

Participants in Phase two were not given the option to remain anonymous and were assigned pseudonyms. Even though a few did say they did not mind their real names being used in the thesis, a key reason I chose to anonymise participants in phase two is power dynamics and my role as a researcher. At the end of interviews, participants would often ask me to thank

²⁰ Abdullah is a pseudonym for an Arabic speaking community activist who has given consent for our conversation to be used in the thesis.

local authorities on their behalf for enacting the VPRS. This would particularly come out at the end of every interview when I would ask participants for ways they thought resettlement in the North East could be improved. This insinuates that because their suggestions might indicate an ungratefulness towards the scheme, participants simultaneously felt an obligation to show their gratitude to the local authority. This may have limited, firstly, the number of participants who expressed their dissatisfaction with the scheme. Secondly, it may have limited the extent of their truthfulness if deciding to express their dissatisfaction as they may have eliminated aspects of their experience so that they did not negatively criticize the local authority. Thirdly, and most importantly for my decision to anonymize, it may indicate that their desire to show gratitude may have also created pressure to agree to non-anonymity. Anonymity for those framed as ‘vulnerable’ was also encouraged by the ethical guidelines I studied for this project.

In addition to the 41 interviews conducted with the main actor groups shown above, one interview was held with an individual who migrated to the North East of England from an Arabic country to join their family member who was in the UK for work and a second interview with a Syrian asylum seeker who came to the UK and particularly the North East of England on their own outside of any resettlement schemes like the VPRS, whilst seeking protection from the conflict in Syria. Whilst these participants do not fit the main participant tables, these were individuals that were suggested to me as potential interviewees from other participants of phase two as they very accurately predicted that their perspectives would contextualise the broader environment on resettlement and vulnerability that I have been working on. Their details are recorded in the table below.

Interview No.	Pseudonym	Participant Details	Local Authority Profile	Interview Date
42	Wafa	Economic migrant; from an Arabic-speaking country; came to join husband who was in UK for work	Did not participate in VPRS	11 June 2021
43	Zayn	Asylum seeker; Syrian; single father of two underaged children	Trailblazer	10 June 2021

Figure 7: Overview of interviews 42 and 43

(c) Transcription and Thematic Analysis

After the interview process was finalised, interviews were transcribed using dictation software to capture the words said in the audio recording. I would then revisit those first transcriptions to add corrections and punctuation where needed. Some detail on how things were said (pitch, tone, volume, pauses) were also recorded in the transcripts.

Transcriptions were then used for thematic analysis. Themes were data driven and were allowed to emerge naturally through the transcribed materials. A code table was created that was then used to guide the structure of empirical chapters. See Appendices A, B and C for sample codes for each actor I interviewed.

Applying ethical guidelines for research on ‘vulnerable adults’, in practice

The mitigation of risks was exacerbated in the remote approach. This is because I had to abandon the ethnographic approach and replace it with qualitative interviews. The main difference between ethnography and qualitative interviews lies in the engagement the researcher has with participants. Ethnography, which is deeply connected to participant

observation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019), requires ‘spending long periods watching people, coupled with talking to them about what they are doing, thinking and saying, designed to see how they understand their world’ (Delamont, 2006, p.206). To do this, researchers are expected to ‘[live] with the people being studied, watching them work and play, thinking carefully about what is seen, interpreting it and talking to the actors to check the emerging interpretations’ (ibid). Meanwhile, qualitative interviews are short and more structured ‘social encounters where speakers collaborate in producing retrospective (and prospective) accounts or versions of their past (or future) actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts’ (Rapley, 2006, p.16). With the remote approach not only could I no longer establish this longer-term engagement with participants, but I was also expected to carry this shorter and structured interaction completely online. As a result, there were more risks to consider whilst preparing for this new approach.

The risks I had to consider were linked to vulnerability. Due to the focus of the project, it was highly likely that some of the research participants mostly from the refugee populations, but also possibly from the practitioner side, were affected by the different forms of vulnerability I am examining for this thesis. Therefore, to plan for research on ‘vulnerable adults’ for phase two, I had to revisit my notes from the training I outlined earlier on doing ethical fieldwork and consider and adapt several guidelines for the remote approach. I will be discussing two of these guidelines, their intersection and how their application worked in practice. The two principles underlying these guidelines are ‘equality, partnership, and autonomy’ and ‘reflexivity and do no harm’.

I had to consider several points to ensure my project encouraged equality, partnership, and autonomy towards the ‘vulnerable group’ I would be working with. First, as mentioned in the previous section, I arranged for a 2-phase approach, initially planned to allow flexibility with the pandemic and ensure that I would have access to the groups of participants I needed. In

the process of my conversations, I saw that phase one also had an ethical dimension. This was not obvious at the beginning, but it became clearer when I had to revise the necessary paperwork I was working with. I followed the recommended university templates and initially prepared an Information Sheet and a Privacy Notice which I planned to translate in Arabic and distribute to participants to read before reading and signing a Consent Form which I was also planning to translate in Arabic.

The Information Sheet would clarify to participants that: ‘if you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving reason and without detriment to yourself’.

Moreover, they were reminded that:

The research is entirely independent of any refugee organisation, local authority or charity and as such your decision to participate will have no bearing on any of these potential services and agencies. Your decision to participate or not will not be communicated to any outside agency, organisation or local authority.

The last reminder was particularly important to me because in line with an attempt on partnership, the interviews were to be utilised by the interviewees as a secure and independent space, where they could raise issues and have their individual voice heard without fear of retribution. As a result, I did not want participants to make connections of reciprocity between my project and the support they received from the service providers about whom I was asking.

Nevertheless, when the guidelines were put in practice, it became obvious that there were problems with the application. As mentioned earlier, part of my collaboration with the RRF was to arrange an introductory meeting with community activists who spoke Arabic and who would later act as an initial gateway to the VPRS community in the region. After the initial introduction, a series of extensive negotiations followed between the community activists,

and me, to draft a second ethics proposal which would outline the nature of the interview process in phase two. A major point of concern in these negotiations were the Information Sheet, Privacy Notice and Consent Form mentioned above:

I was ready to submit the proposal for Phase two to the Ethics and Risk Committee tomorrow but after this meeting with [the community activists] I don't think this is wise anymore. There are a lot of changes that I need to consider. First, on the way I communicate the material from the Information Sheet and the Privacy Notice. Second, the way I ask for consent. They don't think the documents I prepared are appropriate.

One of the community activists stated: 'Families are very poor. Uneducated. Most of them have been in a camp for seven years. You need to make these documents very simple for them'.

[The community activists] suggested that if some sort of document was necessary, I could prepare a poster which I could share on screen with the community activist and the participants on the day of the interview. They also said that I should trust the community activist I will be working with and let them collect verbally in Arabic the consent I required before or on the day of the interview. I could sense that the community activists felt that seeking consent on the day was unnecessary since participants would only make the effort to attend the interview if they already consented to the community activist that they are willing to speak to me.

I can see their point but how will I get approval from the Ethics and Risk Committee for this?

[Fieldnotes diary, 26 January 2021]

With hindsight, this excerpt from my fieldnotes highlights that ethical guidelines are useful when planning but should not be fixed when applied in practice. At this point, it is important to highlight a further ethical principle I was engaging with at the time: reflexivity and doing

no harm. A main takeaway from my training was that each situation is unique and many of the dilemmas faced in participatory research need to be resolved on a case-by-case basis. Researchers need to continuously reflect on ethical considerations from the instant a project is designed, to the moment its findings are published (Liempt and Bilger, 2009). As a result, if I genuinely wanted to consider equality, partnership, and autonomy in a way that would not harm the community I would be interacting with, I needed to learn to listen to the participants and prioritize their needs over the templates and guidelines dictated by the university and the Ethics and Risk Committee. The refugee families resettled in the North East did not understand informed consent the way researchers in academic settings are trained to comprehend it. The traditionally defined concept of informed and voluntary consent promoted by universities involves ‘culturally bound, western values of individual autonomy, self-determination, and freedom’ (Ellis et al, 2007, p. 467) which does not capture the means needed to carry out the interviews with the resettled refugees in the North East. This has also forged an understanding of consent that is increasingly bureaucratised which can become opaque to anyone not specifically trained in this field. I therefore had to redefine informed consent in a way that would reflect the community I would be interacting with.

Ways to elicit informed consent

Eliciting informed consent was complex as I had to consider approaches beyond those expected by the university. Nevertheless, in my case, redefining informed consent was additionally complex because of the remote approach. This was because I was planning to circulate these documents via email. Many of the refugees I was planning to communicate with, however, were to an extent digitally illiterate and would have struggled to access these documents on their own before the interview. I therefore needed to consider alternative ways of providing this information in a way that would not be difficult for them.

Consider the example of the Information Sheet, the Privacy Notice and the Consent Form from Phase 1, where I also used the university recommended templates. Most of the participants in Phase one were English native speakers, would not be considered by the Ethics and Risk Committee as ‘vulnerable’, assumedly comprehended the traditional understanding of informed consent and were digitally literate. Nevertheless, I found that after a couple of interviews not many of them read or cared much about my very detailed documents I would send via email. These were people with busy lives that were in the majority entirely online, were often overwhelmed by amount of online workload (for example, they mentioned ‘Zoom burnout’) and often did not have time to read these documents prior to our interview. I ended up having to ask them at the start of every interview whether they had a chance to read the documents I sent them. If not, I provided them with a verbal summary instead, which I found they were much happier with. Following the last conversation I had with the community activists on the documents provided to Phase two participants, I decided to experiment with the idea of a summary on a poster, which I would share with participants via email in place of the previous multiple page-long documents. I would also specify in that email that if they required more information, I have detailed documents I can share with them. Not a single participant requested to access the more detailed documents except from one. As I recorded in my notes:

Amie is a policy practitioner but also an academic. I never interviewed anyone with this profile before. Because of this profile her concerns on privacy and consent around refugees is very different to what I have encountered until now. For example, she read all my documents meticulously and had questions! No one ever had any questions before the interview. She wanted to make sure I had good intentions and that I was concerned about refugee voices. She also expressed satisfaction because I followed the appropriate ethical suggestions.

(Fieldnotes diary, 21 April 2021)

Amie was the only interviewee who appreciated the more detailed documents I provided because she was also trained to comprehend informed consent from an academic setting, despite her additional role as a policy practitioner. Her appreciation of the documents and approval of the process I followed speaks volumes to the introverted nature of the ethics approval process in UK academia.

After testing the community activists' suggestion with participants not considered a 'vulnerable' group in phase one, I was convinced that I had to follow their suggestion for phase two. Amie's case was a solo example, which additionally highlighted that informed consent should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis and redefined to match the needs of the participants. For this reason, for phase two, a two-slide PowerPoint was prepared which summarised and simplified the Information Sheet, Privacy Notice and Consent Form I would have otherwise shared with them²¹. This included clear and succinct information, free of legal terminology on myself, the project, its aims, anonymity principles, and questions as to what the community activists already told individuals when recruiting them. The PowerPoint was in Arabic and shared on screen at the beginning of the meeting, which either the interpreter read out loud to the participant or if the participant had sufficient English, I would go through in English whilst displaying the slides in Arabic. In cases where no screen could be shared, I communicated the information of the PowerPoint in English and the interpreter, whose role I outline below, translated. Where possible, I sent participants the PowerPoint in Arabic prior to the interview so that they could study it in their own time but these cases were rare.

Consent to audio record meetings and use information discussed for project outputs was then sought verbally and via the interpreter where the participant did not speak English well.

There were two sets of recordings. One of consent with participants names, the other of the interview, anonymised. Those interviews would then be transcribed anonymously and given a

²¹ See Appendix for all relevant documents

pseudonym suitable to the participants' background which would be used throughout the thesis. Regrettably, at the time I did not consider asking participants what pseudonym they would prefer for themselves and upon reflection, this would have been a more suitable approach rather than me providing them with a randomised pseudonym. Regardless, I found that this compromise worked well and its application in practice ran smoothly. Further, this approach allowed me not only to respect the participants' needs but also to make sure that I complied with requirements set out by institutional frames, as embodied in the departmental Ethics and Risk Committee.

Another attempt at encouraging equality, partnership, and autonomy whilst doing no harm was to conduct interviews, where required, with interpreters. Research has shown that when participants are interviewed in a second language, their lack of proficiency affects the way they feel about themselves (Kline et al, 1980; De Zulueta, 1990). Often, they would feel 'less confident, happy and intelligent' (De Zulueta, 1990, p.256). As a result, 'to allow people whose first language is not English to fully express themselves', I had to consider 'the use of an interpreter to manage the communicative exchange between researcher and participants' (Murray C. and Wynne J., 2001, p.159). For this reason, interviews for this project were flexible. For all cases, interviews were conducted either in English or with an interpreter. This depended on the participants' preference and how comfortable they felt to communicate with me in English. Even though a requirement of the VPRS is for resettled individuals to take English classes to learn the language in their first five years in the country, a large portion of the families I spoke with did not have much English despite attending classes meticulously for five years. This was partly because they did not practice enough, since they were always surrounded by Arabic speakers, or because they were too shy to try speaking in English in front of native speakers or non-native speakers like me, who they might consider as more proficient in English than them.

The responses I received on the preference of interpretation varied from participant to participant. There were two main groups of responses and several more specific cases where again, the tension of applying ethical guidelines in practice was highlighted. The first main group were the participants who had no English and required an interpreter. In this case, the individual who recruited them, in most cases coincidentally also a trained professional interpreter in Arabic, would act as the interpreter during the interviews. The second was a more confident group of participants with adequate English, who preferred conducting the interview in English. They saw it as a way to practice speaking the language.

Alternatively, there was a smaller group of participants with minimum English, who initially opted for no interpreter but after difficulties in communication they brought in a younger family member to help with interpretation. Consider the case of Asma. Asma's English was limited. However, the community activist who recruited her was convinced that she could speak to me in English. I am still unclear as to why this was the case. However, when I called her (she wanted to speak to me over the phone, with no cameras) I quickly came to the realization that Asma's English was rudimentary and was struggling to understand or communicate with me in basic sentences. Because we were not understanding each other at all, Asma brought her 17-year-old daughter into the conversation to act as an interpreter. The conversation ended well but I was placed in a situation that I had not prepared for. As I recorded in my notes,

[Asma] and I could not understand each other today. [...]. She brought in her daughter [Farah] to translate. [Farah] is under 18 years old. I did not prepare for such a scenario, and this made me nervous. What do I do in such cases? I never thought the participants would willingly bring into the conversation their underaged child. Also, part of the Risk and Ethics Committee agreement was to interact only with adult individuals that were over 18 years old. I even had to go back and put emphasis on the 'adult' in the initial proposal I sent

the Committee for this phase. How do I justify this to the Risk and Ethics Committee if this comes up? [Asma] consented for [Farah] to translate but perhaps I should have refused to resume the interview. Maybe we should have picked this up another day. With a professional adult interpreter. But what about 'equality, partnership and autonomy'? And 'reflexivity and do no harm'? I cannot aim to achieve these and at the same time refuse to continue the interview. [Asma] was OK with it ... (Fieldnotes diary, 26 May 2021)

The fact that someone under 18, and therefore classified as 'vulnerable', was drawn into the research without my preparation for that, made me nervous. Precarious even, in my status as an inexperienced researcher. Reflecting on this today, however, I believe that my decision was the best I could have made at that given moment. Having Farah as an interpreter, even though underaged, was consented to by her mother and by Farah herself who was curious to participate in our conversation. Her role was also presented by Asma as a solution to the issue we were experiencing. Rescheduling the interview would have breached my attempts on equality, partnership and autonomy and might have even distressed Asma, who might have not wanted the interview to take place on another day through a stranger. Asma's example highlights further what I've been arguing throughout this section i.e., that ethical guidelines are useful for preparation to enter the fieldwork, but they cannot always be followed strictly. Researchers need to be reflexive and adjust our approach on a case-by-case basis. This is something applicable for any group of participants, but it is extremely crucial to consider when working with groups framed as 'vulnerable'. Especially when working with such groups in the remote approach. This is because vulnerability is not a set characteristic, and whatever the amount of preparation on understanding who could be framed as 'vulnerable' and what these vulnerabilities may look like, the reality is that these are just assumptions one makes based on previous experiences that cannot predict the full extent of the situation the researcher may find themselves in at any given point in the fieldwork. The remote approach

requires even further considerations around vulnerability because to be taken into account in addition to any vulnerabilities one may have when meeting them in person, as these can be exacerbated by the extra requirements that the remote approach places on the interaction. One such example is digital illiteracy which can complicate the aspect of informed consent.

Consider a last example where I was following ethical guidelines from the start, but the unpredictability of the field positioned me in a situation I could not have predicted. To apply the principle of reflexivity and doing no harm mentioned earlier, I followed some basic refugee and anthropological guidelines stemming from the premise of doing no harm when interviewing participants. All my interactions with participants for example, avoided questions on sensitive issues relating to racial or ethnic origin; political opinions for their country of origin; religious beliefs; physical or mental health; sexual life, behaviour and orientation; illegal behaviour. However, I did not consider the case of Amal. Amal was one of the Arabic speaking recruiters that I was introduced to via snowballing from participants of the VCS. She was of refugee background (from a different conflict to that of Syria), had been in the UK for years and was working as a professional Arabic interpreter for one of the VCS organisations I was in touch with. She had experience interpreting for Syrian refugees as a professional interpreter but was also of a similar cultural, ethnic, and linguistic background. This meant that she could provide insight that professional interpreters from different backgrounds could not. We conducted several interviews together and none of the topics discussed distressed her in any way. Following the basic refugee and anthropological guidelines stemming from the premise of doing no harm, I avoided asking her about her country and its conflict, whose side of the conflict she was on and how she ended up in the UK. I also avoided asking if she had left anyone behind or what her family situation was.

However, in one of the later interviews with one of the VPRS participants, one of my questions distressed Amal, who started crying on camera. The participant for whom Amal

was translating, had just described their experience living in the North East and I had asked them if they were feeling vulnerable in the North East. They said no and proceeded to explain that they felt vulnerable when they left Syria, emphasising the racism they experienced living in Turkey before their resettlement in the UK. This triggered Amal who started crying and was finding it difficult to translate on behalf of the participant. Seeing Amal in her distressed state caused the participant to also start crying. I offered to end the interview, but both the interpreter and participant wanted to continue. As a result, I paused the interview for five minutes, everyone having their camera and microphone off until ready to come back to the call. The interview was then resumed normally. I considered whether it was appropriate to point to them relevant counselling services whilst we were taking a break, but I decided that it felt inappropriate in this context and decided against it. Upon the interview's completion Amal and I had a debriefing session. I asked her if she was feeling ok and I apologised if my question to the participant made her feel uncomfortable. She then explained to me, without me asking, that she was triggered by the idea of racism towards Muslims from fellow Muslims. Being from a refugee background herself she explained to me that she came to the UK as a student years ago and after the war, she never left. The participant's story was similar to that of Amal's family and what they had to experience fleeing conflict themselves. Amal's distress was not triggered by her own memories but were built on those of her family and the story that was passed down to her through them.

Amal's example underlines the unpredictability of the field. Despite following ethical guidance as much as I could, the interview put Amal in an uncomfortable position that I could not have predicted. The key in these circumstances, as I learnt, is to weigh the various options that could be suitable and consider the one that would cause the least harm to the individuals participating and aiding the researcher in their project and indeed whether the situation at hand is one that requires research to be abandoned in favour of the well-being of participants.

Conclusion

This chapter unpacked two key experiences I underwent whilst preparing for and being in the field researching vulnerability. The first was the abandonment of my original plans and the switch to a plan for a remote approach because of the pandemic, whilst an inexperienced researcher. The second was the tension when applying ethical guidelines on groups of people framed as ‘vulnerable’ in normative ethical review processes and institutional frameworks. Overall, undertaking fieldwork remotely was undeniably the most appropriate approach to undertake research during the pandemic as alongside the ethical restrictions, there were also legal restrictions in place which meant that any in-person alternative was not possible for the majority of the time that this fieldwork took place. However, the mitigation of risks was exacerbated in the remote approach. This is because I ended up doing much more recording than traditional ethnography would have envisioned. In my attempts to mitigate risks I came to the realization that when conducting research with groups of people framed as ‘vulnerable’ in normative ethical review processes and institutional frameworks, it is vital that researchers are attuned to the need to develop situated judgments of ethical practice and responsibility in situ. Critically, this may mean questioning or challenging existing ethical guidelines to prioritise the community they are interacting with and to build and sustain ethical research relationships.

To summarise, my methodological journey through this research left me with three lessons. First, that through sticking to the ethical and legal guidelines around Covid-19, adjustments to them need to be made in practice. Second, these adjustments, however minor, may appear daunting to early career researchers: the switch from detailed documents to PowerPoint slides might appear simple but for inexperienced researchers such as doctoral students, it may be daunting and distressing to stray from hard-earned approvals. Third, when working with

‘vulnerable’ groups, we may do well to prepare for tackling distressing or ethically uncomfortable situations, but these may materialise in unexpected ways that preparatory scenarios will not envision, despite how many versions of them we conjure up before fieldwork.

PART II Actors' Perspectives on the VPRS

Chapter 5-Austerity and the shifting role of local government

Introduction

This chapter focuses on local authorities and their role as one of the three actors involved with the VPRS from 2014 onwards. As I have previously explained in Part I, VPRS was the UK's response to UNHCR's 2014 global resettlement needs, which pledged to resettle by 20,000 'vulnerable' refugees who fled the Syrian conflict and by 2020 had sought protection in Iraq, Egypt, Turkey and Lebanon. After the financial crisis of 2007/2008, the UK entered a period of economic recession, with the first austerity measures introduced in late 2008. Local authorities experienced significant cuts in governmental funding during this period and the North East was rendered as one of the most deprived regions in England (National Audit Office, 2018; Smith et al, 2016). It is within this context that local authorities were presented with the VPRS and were asked to implement its parameters.

Contributing to literature discussing first, vulnerability as a resource and second, the uneven effects of austerity, in this chapter I show the creative and diverse approaches which local authorities in the North East were forced to embrace in response to austerity challenges.

Drawing from my interviews with local authorities, I show how Gateshead and Newcastle Councils became 'trailblazers', as interviewees called them, due to their previous experience in refugee support and their use of existing infrastructure, in operationalising the VPRS.

Meanwhile, Durham County Council and Northumberland County Council were local authorities that 'came at it completely fresh' and chose to set a separate team specific to the operations of the VPRS to allow for better clarity on the responsibilities of their team on the enactment of the scheme. Additionally, I show that Hartlepool Borough Council, despite its attempts to draw from existing infrastructure from teams working with groups framed as

‘vulnerable’ within their community, was not able to catch up with the levels of demand, as these services consisted of smaller teams. I argue that whilst in this case an approach like Durham’s might have been more suitable for the needs of the local authority, such an approach may create tensions with existing teams who due to austerity have undergone significant budget cuts. Finally, I argue that these different approaches would not have been possible without the flexibility central government has allowed with funding, which allows local government to use resources as they see fit if they mobilize discretion in deciding how to use that funding.

Overview of VPRS intake of persons per local authority in the North East

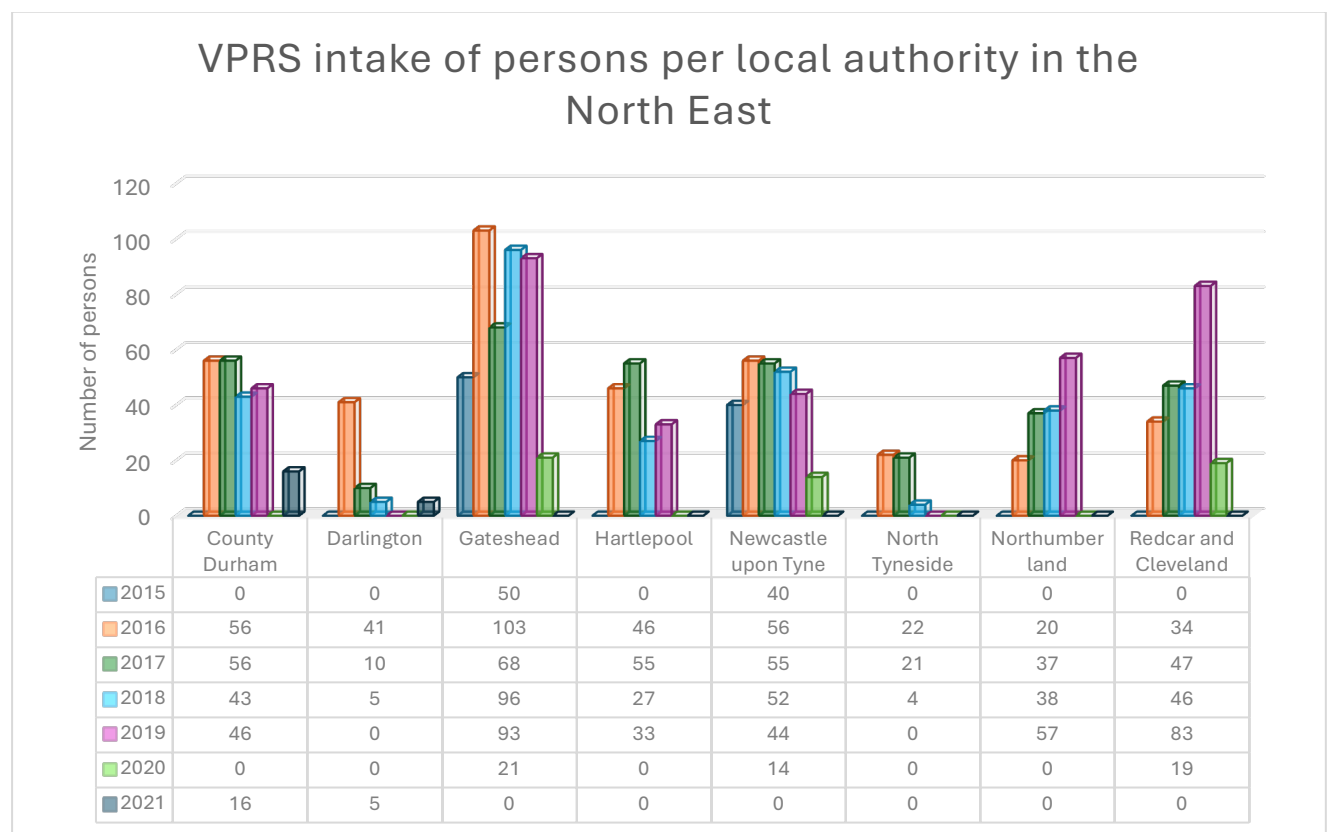


Figure 8: VPRS intake of persons per local authority in the North East

*Analysed from data retrieved from the Home Office (2019a)

As I have already mentioned in chapter three, 332 local authorities took part in the enactment of the VPRS in the UK (Home Office, 2019a). In the North East, eight out of the 13 local

authorities participated in the VPRS: County Durham, Darlington, Gateshead, Hartlepool, Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside, Northumberland and Redcar and Cleveland. Drawing from the asylum and resettlement datasets published by the Home Office (2019a), in figure eight above, I show the VPRS intake of persons per local authority from 2015 when the scheme started, up until 2021 when it was replaced by the UK Resettlement Scheme to accommodate vulnerable persons of all nationalities affected by any conflict. The data suggests that there was a first increase of refugee intake in 2016, which significantly decreased in 2020 due to Covid-19, with five of eight local authorities hosting zero persons via the scheme in that year. With the scheme coming to an end in 2021, only County Durham and Darlington resettled refugees through VPRS in 2021.

I conducted interviews with County Durham, Gateshead, Hartlepool, North Tyneside and Northumberland. Drawing from these interviews, the sections that follow show how they described their experiences of enacting the VPRS in the North East of England.

The ‘trailblazers’

One set of local authorities that was quite prominent in my interviews with local government was what participants referred to as ‘trailblazers’. These ‘trailblazers’ were Newcastle and Gateshead; they were the two local authorities who were tasked by the North East Migration Partnership²² to participate in a pilot version of the VPRS in 2015.

As Claire, a leading officer from Gateshead Council says:

²² The North East Migration Partnership (NEMP) as outlined on their website, ‘provides strategic leadership and local support across the North East region, and is hosted by Middlesbrough Council. NEMP works with national, regional and local partners to ensure that the region can deal with, and benefit from, migration’ (North East Migration Partnership, 2023).

We were approached in 2015. Us [Gateshead] and Newcastle. To be trailblazers for the VPRS. We didn't have anything in place at all. So we had to basically put reports in very quickly to counsellors and directors and get consent and buy in from the Council. Which was fine (Interview #23, 14 October 2021).

Participation in the VPRS was voluntary for local authorities. As a result, it was important that local politicians and figures of authority within the local government endorsed and approved the setup of the VPRS before it was piloted. This was an important step for the enactment of the VPRS for two reasons. First, it would portend any signs of hostility as local politicians' endorsement or rejection of the scheme would reflect their constituents' sentiment towards refugee support in their area, ensuring in this way that refugees were placed where possible in local authorities that were majorly positive towards refugee welcome in their areas (Flug and Hussein, 2019). Second, local politician support would encourage more easily partnerships with infrastructure such as schools, housing and healthcare for resettled refugees (Flug and Hussein, 2019; Haycox, 2022). This was an especially important step following the decentralisation of care and welfare brought by the previous years of austerity (Clarke and Newman, 2012). Notably, Newcastle was one of the first local authorities to take part in the Asylum Dispersal System in 1999 and has been a City of Sanctuary since 2014 (Flug and Hussein, 2019). In figure nine below I show that from the eight local authorities that participated in the VPRS from 2015 to 2021, Newcastle and Gateshead hosted the largest number of asylum seekers in receipt of section 95 support for the 10 years before VPRS was introduced. Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, allows the Home Office, as part of the Asylum Dispersal System, to provide asylum seekers who are destitute or likely to become destitute within 14 days with housing and financial support (UK Visas and Immigration, 2024b). In this instance, if the VPRS was to be enacted in the North East of England and other local authorities would be encouraged to participate, it was vital that

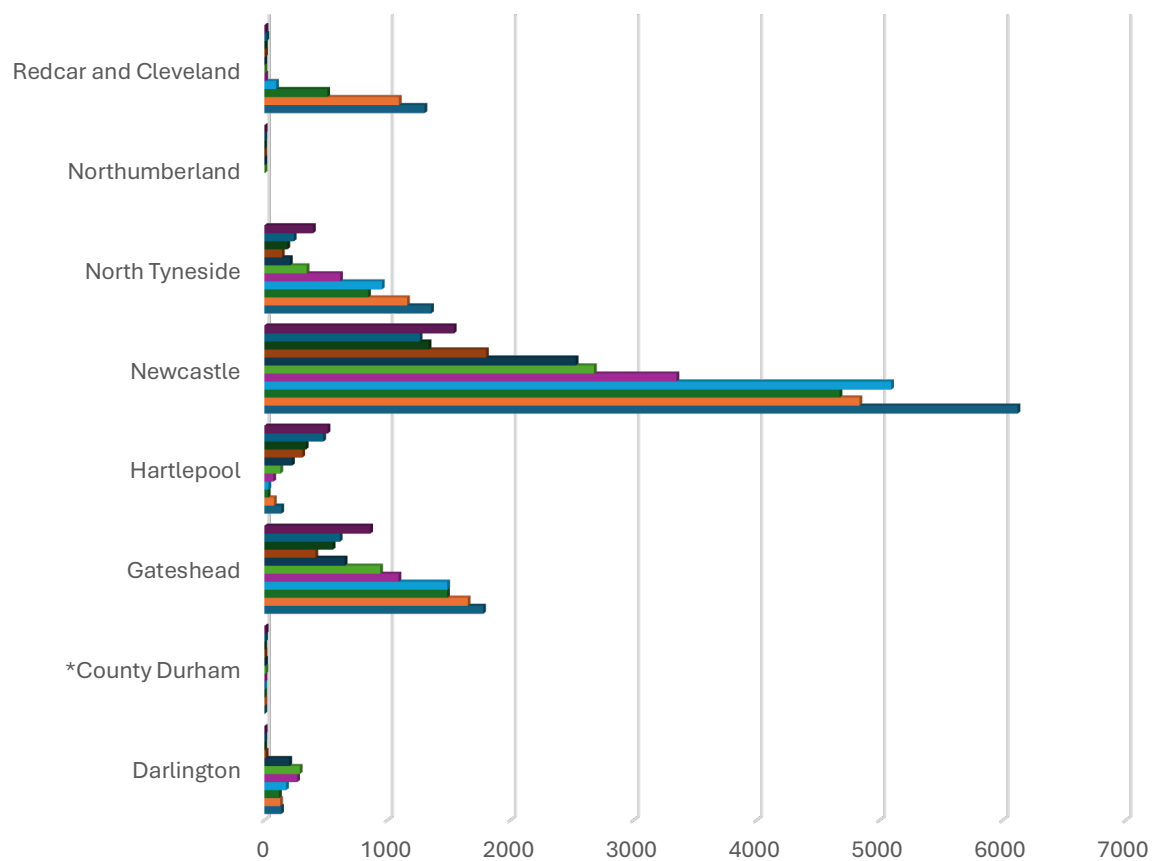
Newcastle and Gateshead ‘trailblazed’ at this starting phase and the VPRS was endorsed by their local politicians who arguably, would echo the areas’ overall positive sentiment towards refugee welcome (ibid).

Following local politician approval, the local authorities had six weeks at the local level to set everything up before the arrival of families. This posed challenges in the ways in which ‘vulnerabilities’ (within the definition of the scheme) were addressed. As Claire explains:

And then we had six weeks from the agreement and at a local level to families flying into the country. So we often get information from the Home Office, and UNHCR on the families. We looked at that, and we looked at what key partners we would need to have involved. So in terms of the vulnerabilities, generally the families could be classed all as vulnerable because they're displaced. So they've lost their social networks, they've lost their economic status, they've lost their environment, you know, they've been exposed to war and, completely in terms of the future, there's no certainty. So if you're looking at vulnerability, that was already there. But then in terms of more defined vulnerability, we had families with medical problems, we had elderly, we had children who were working. So there was a lot of generalistic vulnerabilities that you could think about, but then there were more significant issues on top of that (Interview #23, 14 October 2021).

Both the ‘generalistic vulnerabilities’ that were caused ‘because they’re displaced’ and the ‘more significant issues’, Claire highlights here, underline the vulnerabilities that deemed refugees eligible for resettlement to the UK as per the UNHCR ‘vulnerability’ criteria and with which local authorities needed to work when they first started setting up the logistics of the VPRS. But the differentiation Claire makes of the ‘generalistic’ and ‘more significant’ issues shows an awareness, amongst frontline personnel like her, of the various levels on

Asylum Seekers in receipt of Section 95 support, by local authority, per year for 10 years before the enactment of VPRS



	Darlington	*County Durham	Gateshead	Hartlepool	Newcastle	North Tyneside	Northumberland	Redcar and Cleveland
2014	4	11	860	514	1540	395	4	10
2013	1	6	613	479	1262	239	1	17
2012	0	0	556	337	1336	187	0	5
2011	12	2	415	308	1802	143	0	6
2010	203	6	653	225	2531	208	1	1
2009	287	9	941	130	2679	344	2	2
2008	267	3	1090	73	3349	615		7
2007	177	0	1487	33	5094	955		95
2006	120	0	1485	28	4675	843		511
2005	129	1	1653	78	4836	1160		1093
2004	136	1	1778	138	6121	1355		1302

Figure 9: Asylum seekers in receipt of Section 95 support, by local authority, per year, for 10 years before the enactment of VPRS

* Analysed from data retrieved from the Home Office (2019b)

* The Home Office spreadsheet I analysed referred to 'Durham' until Quarter One of 2009. From Quarter Two onwards, it switched to 'County Durham'.

which vulnerability exists and the different needs for addressing it.

As Claire highlights below, to help families integrate, the local authority had to put together in a team a significant number of community experts from health, community safety and social care amongst others, underlining those partnerships that were necessary to enact VPRS on the ground:

we almost got together like a panel of people, [...] a representative from the clinical commissioning group, so health, who would link him [the representative] with GPs. And if we had anything we didn't understand in terms of medical problems, we could ask advice for. Northumbria police in terms of community safety. Community Safety team comes in who we work with, it's just a common place now for us to contact everyone. Social Care, we obviously got into for social care that we don't have many issues with social care. Fire Service, we got involved with, just in case there's any fire risks [...]. The barrier for us really, in terms of that initial setup was the Department for Work and Pensions and Benefits. But now we don't have any issue at all, sort of six years down the line (Interview #23, 14 October 2021).

This passage shows how the enactment of the VPRS required partnerships with governmental institutions with experience working with those considered ‘vulnerable’ within the North East population even if this experience was not necessarily with refugees and asylum seekers, which could provide the local authority with considerable support in its efforts to enact the VPRS. Apart from the external partnerships that Claire and her team had to establish, they also had to ensure communications with departments working internally within the local authority, such as that of housing, a department with arguably considerable experience working with vulnerability within the local authority:

Internally, our housing team, they were part of housing really, were identifying properties in council stock. The agreement we came to with the letting team was we would look at the

lower demand area so that we weren't putting people off the Housing Register that had been on the Housing Register for a long time. It's all about keeping the balance. So what we did was we put requests in to look at the accommodation first. And once we've got an address, we can then look at sharing that with colleagues and health and education and the police and everything and then all the rest fits in around where that house is. So your GP practices as near as possible. And then if we can get a school close by (Claire, Interview #23, 14 October 2021).

What Claire says here underlines the growing challenge for many to find affordable housing or gain access to social housing. According to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (2023), in England alone, there were 1.2 million households on local authority waiting lists on the 31st of March 2022. These included social housing properties which were either rented by the local authority²³, or a private registered provider which includes housing associations. Notably, only 17% of households in England live in social housing (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Despite the increased need for social housing, during 2022, more than half of local authorities did not build a single house to tackle the issue with housing provision due to a lack of funding from central government and the restrictive measures in place that dictate how the construction of these new properties is financed (Bancroft, 2023).

On the 24th of July 2023 the then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced that the government ‘will meet [its] manifesto commitment to build one million homes over this Parliament’. Nevertheless, a few weeks after this announcement, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities ‘handed back £1.9bn to the treasury-originally meant to tackle England’s housing crisis-after reportedly struggling to find projects to spend it on’ (Bancroft, 2023). The department was unable to spend the money, due to the ‘rising interest rates and

²³ Also known as council housing.

uncertainty in the housing market after the Covid-19 pandemic' (Stacey, 2023). The current rent figures for Britain are at one of the highest levels they have been over the last decade, meaning that thousands of people are struggling to pay their rent and face the threat of homelessness (Mata, 2023). Consequently, this also means that households with lower incomes are even more dependent on social housing since the private rent market is unaffordable.

As a result, for Claire and her team the assigning of social housing for the purpose of the VPRS had become a political decision that had to keep the balance between the accommodation they offered to VPRS and to other social tenants. This links to the notions of deservingness I have discussed in chapter two. Claire and her team were working with a group of refugees that presumably represented the cultural expectations of 'authentic' refugeehood with the potential to integrate well into the local community. This deemed those resettling in the area deserving of protection. Nevertheless, in the political context of austerity, the public knows that the state no longer provides protection to those it frames as 'vulnerable' (Cooper and Whyte, 2017). This includes individuals who may be ill, disabled or unemployed. By making exceptions on housing for resettled refugees, the local government runs the risk of upsetting its constituents who have been waiting for social housing allocation for years. As a result, Claire and her team are pressured to find a means to 'keep the balance'; provide protection to refugees but also not upset the local authority's constituents. In this instance, 'keeping the balance' exemplifies how the notion of 'welcome' is fragile and always at risk of being subjugated to the needs of other populations (Darling, 2018; 2016). This also emphasises how integration policies can be restrictive and conditional.

Moreover, Gateshead and Newcastle Councils, despite claiming that they didn't have anything in place when tasked as 'trailblazers' in the VPRS pilot version, the high number of asylum seekers in receipt of Sector 95 support in their areas and Newcastle's role as a City of

Sanctuary, meant that they maintained a strong refugee community sector. In 2012 accommodation and support for the Asylum Dispersal System were privatised, passing these responsibilities from local authorities to private contractors. Nevertheless, the refugee community sector that was developed as a result of the launch of the Asylum Dispersal System in the area was still operating alongside the privatised services filling in the gaps of the privatised provision which was dictated by its contracts with the central government. In fact, the existence of multiple refugee- supporting charities in Newcastle meant that the city's role as a City of Sanctuary focuses on raising public awareness on refugee welcome and not service provision (Flug and Hussein, 2019). Consider the example of Jobs, Education and Training (JET), which has been offering English language classes as part of Newcastle City Council's ESOL (English for Speakers of other Languages) service since 2001:

JET was originally established in 2001 as part of Newcastle City Council's ESOL service. We became a registered charity in April 2006. It was recognized that there was a gap in provision to help those who were either from the settled ethnic backgrounds in the City, or newly arrived in the UK, to overcome some of the challenges they faced in searching for work, suitable training and work experience, as well as integrating into society and indeed the local communities (JET, 2019).

Despite the austerity measures which as I show in the next chapter, were detrimental to the VCS in the North East, charities like JET persevered and continued providing services to refugees and asylum seekers in the area. As a result, when VPRS was introduced by the central government, it was easier for the 'trailblazers' Newcastle and Gateshead to draw from pre-existing partnerships to enact the VPRS. As I will show in the sections that follow, this was not the case with local authorities that lacked this pre-existing infrastructure.

To summarise, the ‘trailblazers’ category to which Newcastle and Gateshead Councils belong, were able to mobilize their experience with the Asylum Dispersal System and Newcastle’s role as a City of Sanctuary in the North East, when they were tasked by the North East Migration Partnership to pilot VPRS in 2015. This piloting approach included drawing from existing infrastructure in place both externally and internally within the operations of the council to kickstart the enactment of the VPRS. Whilst participants said that they didn’t have anything in place when they started organizing the application of the VPRS, they still had established teams in place, that were not necessarily for refugees or asylum seekers but had experience working with those considered ‘vulnerable’ within the North East population and could provide the local authority with considerable support in its efforts to enact the VPRS. Despite the relatively smooth setup of the VPRS, the impact of austerity on the ‘trailblazers’ was evident in the pressure the VPRS teams faced in their attempts to keep the balance on social housing and what they offered for those resettled through VPRS. The lack of proper social housing is a growing issue in the UK which keeps getting worse due to consecutive neoliberal policies enacted by different governments.

‘Starting from scratch’: local authorities with some experience but limited infrastructure

Alongside the ‘trailblazers’, there were local authorities that had some experience with refugee provision, but it was from a long time ago and there was limited if any, pre-existing refugee infrastructure in place from their experience as Asylum Dispersal areas to draw from to support them with the enactment of the VPRS. These local authorities had to ‘start from scratch’, as interviewees often explained. Drawing from my interviews, such a local authority was Hartlepool Borough Council. Eleanor outlines Hartlepool’s first attempts to set up for the VPRS:

we began participating in the scheme back in May 2016. We [observed] the pilot scheme, and there was multi agency involvement. So you have people from health, mental health services, police, education, the local authority, public health, to look at what support potentially somebody may need when they come here, and what support we could or would not be able to offer to meet the needs of people. So initially, my role was as a support worker, so I was the hands-on support when they were here to integrate and settle. But now, I do the coordinating and [...] making sure that we've got the right partners in. So yeah, housing teams and all that type of stuff. [...] the scheme actually started back in 2015. So it was Newcastle and Gateshead who did a pilot. And then from that, that's when it's gone to the wider North East local authorities (Interview #24, 28 October 2021).

A first thing to note is Eleanor's changing role as the VPRS developed. Whilst transitioning from a more hands-on role to a more managerial one as an employee who has been working with a team for a long time is common in most areas of work, transitioning between different roles or departments within the local authority was common practice in the enactment of the VPRS, especially within local authorities with limited experience of refugee and asylum seeker provision. These transitions are rooted in the austerity measures local authorities had to adapt to over the years. Austerity has forced local authorities to significantly restructure the way they operate. In fact, research has identified that 'cross-departmental working' (Turner et al, 2023, p.655) and 'efficiency' (Kerasidou, 2019, p.175) are necessary strategies that local authorities had to take because of the 'regressive redistribution' (Peck, 2014, p.19) of various of their services due to the austerity measures they faced in recent years.

This cross-departmental working and efficiency can also be observed in the enactment of the VPRS and how experience working in a role involved with the support of those the local authority considers 'vulnerable', is a key skill that exemplifies this. Claire for example, in the section above, mentioned that Gateshead's housing team for VPRS 'were part of housing

really’ (Interview #23, 14 October 2021), which as I have already underlined is a prominent department working with vulnerability. This can be reinstated with Susan from Northumberland County Council, who in 2019 transitioned from being the ‘principle “vulnerable” persons housing officer for the authority’ (Interview #25, 23 November 2021), to being the leading officer for the enactment of the VPRS in Northumberland County Council. A similar example can be identified in Durham County Council, where most of their team came from a housing background (Lindsay, Interview #27, 21 October 2021). In this instance, all three examples show how housing was a key department in the enactment of the VPRS through collaboration and efficiency across departments. A first reason why housing has such a key role in the enactment and setup of the VPRS may link to the fact that after services for the Asylum Dispersal System were privatised, local authorities through a ‘tactical use of discretion’ (Darling, 2022, p. 5) were able to influence the conditions of dispersal accommodation, which were seen by central government as ‘efforts to manage housing stocks and homelessness among local authorities’ (ibid). As a result, it may be possible that the housing departments were the only departments within the local authorities still left with some involvement in refugee or asylum seeker provision. As a result, when the VPRS was introduced, the officers working within these departments were the first to be enlisted to enact the scheme due to their experience working in the refugee and asylum-seeking sector. A second reason could be the experience the housing departments had working with vulnerability. Whilst this may not be vulnerability specific to refugees or asylum seekers local authorities valued this experience and incorporated it into the enactment of the scheme.

A different but noteworthy example is also that of Anna, a support worker at North Tyneside Council, who was employed by the local authority after graduating from university. Whilst Anna had no previous employment working with vulnerability in local government the way that the other examples did, Anna did her ‘undergraduate dissertation on Syrian refugees,

which gave [her] an idea of what the situation is. How the programme works in relation to local authorities and housing associations. On the kind of ‘vulnerability of all’ (Interview #28, 24 September 2021), as she reflected. Whilst Anna did not have any direct experience working with the local authorities, the insights on the vulnerability she acquired through her research enabled her to get a job enacting the VPRS in North Tyneside, underscoring how important experience with vulnerability was for the local authorities involved.

Returning to the excerpt earlier from my interview with Eleanor and her experience setting up VPRS for Hartlepool Borough Council, what she described underscores the role of Newcastle and Gateshead Councils as ‘trailblazers’ who piloted the VPRS and which served as a learning point for other, less experienced local authorities in the region to observe and mirror according to the needs of their area. When I asked if Hartlepool Council had any prior experience with resettlement or asylum dispersal, Eleanor said:

Not under a resettlement scheme. Not for many, many years. But my colleagues in housing have had experience of resettlement. But that was quite a number of years ago. But we are a dispersal area. So although we don't take on responsibility, we already had asylum seekers who would come into our area. Low numbers, because our population is quite low, but over the years, that number has grown (Interview #24, 28 October 2021).

This quote highlights the aftereffects of the privatisation of asylum dispersal services. In saying that ‘we don’t take on responsibility’ Eleanor speaks of the loss of control local authorities experienced and the impact this had in maintaining any pre-existing infrastructure in place to support refugees and asylum seekers. This also highlights how different the approach to responsibility is between the support provided for asylum seekers and resettled refugees as with the latter, local authority involvement and responsibility is vital for a successful enactment of resettlement schemes such as VPRS. It is also important to note how

the housing department in the local authority is mentioned again, associated with the experience of enacting other resettlement schemes in the past.

The loss or lack of infrastructure specific to refugee communities such as that identified in Newcastle and Gateshead challenged Hartlepool's local authority in its set up of a VPRS team:

It was quite challenging because although we were a dispersal area we don't have or we didn't have and we still don't have a high number of voluntary sector organisations for example. And so we follow the project...it was set in under public health. It was our children's services that did the day-to-day support of families. I will say how it was quite proactive. So although we didn't have them resources already set up, we are quite proactive and just making sure that the right thing is done. So we had to set up ESOL classes, for example. So to begin with, you donate all classes for five men and five women. That was our beginnings. So we literally had to start everything from scratch, whereas other areas already have that infrastructure in place. We didn't and we still don't. We still need to grow ours (Eleanor, Interview #24, 28 October 2021).

A first thing to note is how important the VCS is for the provision of services and filling in the gaps of local government. The lack of infrastructure in the VCS Eleanor underlined in the extract above was also evident during my fieldwork when I was trying to identify suitable charities or initiatives to speak with within the areas the local authorities participating in the VPRS were operating. As I show in chapter six, most local authorities participating in the VPRS (Darlington, Hartlepool, North Tyneside, Northumberland, Redcar and Cleveland) did not have specific organisations or initiatives set up for refugees or asylum seekers prior to 2015 and the ones that were already there, for other 'vulnerable' persons within the local communities, were limited. Four of the oldest and biggest refugee service providing charities

in the North East, were operating within the Newcastle and Gateshead areas. Thus, a significant distinction between the ‘trailblazers’ Newcastle and Gateshead Councils and local authorities like Hartlepool Borough Council who had some experience in refugee provision was the limited to no support from the VCS to draw from.

Furthermore, it is significant to underline how Hartlepool Borough Council attempted to fit the ‘trailblazers’ approach to the VPRS with the resources they had available. However, since there was no existing provision relevant to refugee support within the remit of the local authority, they had to either set up their VPRS services within smaller teams from existing community provision working with vulnerability such as that of ‘public health’ and specifically its ‘children services’ or do some things differently to accommodate the specific needs of the local authority:

Gateshead and Newcastle’ share their best practices, what worked well, what didn’t work so well. So things like engaging with the GP practices, for example. So some areas allow one GP practice and everybody goes through there. We don’t have that here in Hartlepool. So we’ve got to engage individually with GP practices and make sure that they understand the purpose of the scheme, and that there is additional funding that they can tap into, and how can they tap into that. So we would meet individually with individual GP managers, in order to support families’ (Eleanor, Interview #24, 28 October 2021).

The GP example shows how varied the approaches to VPRS were between local authorities in the region. Eleanor’s emphasis that ‘there is additional funding that they can tap into’ also reiterates how financial constraints in the past may have been a primary reason for local authorities and their partners to hesitate to participate in refugee provision, underlining the notion of vulnerability as a resource as funding may have also become an incentive for partners to participate in the enactment of the VPRS. Nevertheless, despite of the VPRS

funding being adequate, years of austerity made it difficult for Hartlepool to setup and maintain the enactment of VPRS:

It's more around setting up the infrastructure because the funding that comes with this scheme [VPRS] is enough. It is a generous fund. And local authorities could choose to spend that funding how they wish. But our team is a very, very small team. [...] ESOL classes had to be started from scratch for example, and there are still difficulties in getting an ESOL tutor and retaining that ESOL tutor. For example, if I chose to resettle five families a year, that means as only five people who require English language, our education settings to then employ a full-time tutor may not be realistic. So you get tutors who are on zero-hour contracts for example. As our asylum seeker group is growing, we are drawing them into the sessions now. So those who can come in and do ESOL, we bring them in and try to do community funding and things like that so that we can grow the classes. This year, we have just seen our College of Further Education have a set of ESOL classes. We've not had that for years. We've got a fantastic college for 16-year-olds, and yet we were travelling people to our neighbouring authority to Stockton. To go to that college in Stockton because that's more diverse. It's got more infrastructure there; it's got more classes. So although we've grown with numbers of families, they were still not staying here to study language, they were going out of town. So we were still not growing. So if people choose to migrate out of town, then again, we still are not going to have our pre entry lessons happening in the town. So it is difficult I would say, if you are starting from scratch' (Eleanor, Interview #24, 28 October 2021).

An important aspect from this passage is the emphasis on the provision of ESOL as necessary infrastructure and the challenges the local authority faced organising these classes. From a financial aspect, the VPRS was offering a 'generous fund' that was enough to support infrastructure like the provision of English language lessons for the refugee families arriving in the remit of the local authority. Nevertheless, Eleanor and her team were facing challenges

‘starting from scratch’ infrastructure that the local authority never offered services for in the past. Unlike with VPRS, where ESOL classes are a mandatory aspect of the services provided by the local authority to those resettled in its remit, in the case of asylum dispersal ESOL classes are not an organised service freely available by local government to those dispersed. Any asylum seeker who wishes to improve their English language skills must rely on their ability to find, finance and travel to classes that are available to any individuals who want to improve their English without these being specific for refugees (Karyotis et al, 2020). This difference on the level of English language provision is rooted in the political discourse of hostility, highlighted in chapter three, where the blame and scapegoating of those considered by the government ‘vulnerable’ is extended to immigration and particularly policies around those seeking asylum. Learning English is a provision that encourages integration, and this is discouraged by the political discourse of hostility. The exception applied to the provision of ESOL in the case of VPRS underscored how the VPRS uses ‘vulnerability’ to create distinctions between those deserving of English language provision and those who are not. Eleanor and the challenges her team faced in the organisation of ESOL, are a product of these hostile policies, as in smaller and less diverse local authorities such as Hartlepool there were less possibilities for non-government led initiatives for English language provision to be set up for asylum seekers like in the case of the ‘trailblazers’ Newcastle and Gateshead.

Another point to note in the excerpt is the ‘zero-hour contracts’ ESOL teachers were on and how employing a ‘full time tutor may not be realistic’ (Eleanor, Interview #24, 28 October, 2021). This approach is rooted in the narrative of flexibility that austerity has cultivated. Individuals on zero-hour contracts work in roles that do not guarantee a minimum number of hours of work (Koumenta and Williams, 2018). These types of contracts are often framed by employers as flexibility and a possibility for a better life balance, even though individuals working under these conditions face financial insecurity and instability (Rydzik and Bal,

2023). This exemplifies the precarity embedded in ‘economies of abandonment’ (Povinelli, 2011, p,186). The local authority not willing to hire someone full time for the role of the English language teacher because it ‘may not be realistic’ regarding the number of people attending the lessons at any given time shows the extent to which local authorities have been forced to adopt flexible employment practices justified as efficiency and cost-cutting despite the VPRS providing sufficient funding to set up proper infrastructure within communities to support refugees resettling in the area.

To summarise, a second group of local authorities enacting the VPRS in the North East were those with some experience in refugee provision but limited pre-existing infrastructure to draw from in their enactment of the VPRS. For this reason, these local authorities had to often ‘start from scratch’ in infrastructural terms. Hartlepool Borough Council is the only local authority I have interviewed which best exemplifies this experience. This is evident in the lack of English language lessons provided as part of asylum dispersal policies, as ESOL classes are not seen as mandatory for asylum seekers. Alternatively, VPRS highlights the necessity for these as a key component for the successful integration of refugees, further underscoring how vulnerability has been used through the VPRS to draw lines of deservingness between people. The impact of austerity is also evident across the way VPRS is implemented through local authorities, with the use of zero-hour contracts for English language teachers rather than permanent positions. Austerity has also been underlined in the way local authorities draw on the experiences of teams and existing resources such as housing teams, to work with vulnerability in the context of the VPRS. Comparing the local authorities who had to start ‘from scratch’ and the ‘trailblazers’, those starting from scratch have been impacted the most from austerity which has also been affecting the enactment of the VPRS in their area.

Local authorities that ‘came at it completely fresh’

A few local authorities chose a completely different approach to the ‘trailblazers’ despite shadowing them. These were local authorities with limited formal services in place prior to VPRS who decided to set up teams specific to the enactment of the VPRS. Drawing from my interviews, this approach was exemplified by Northumberland County Council and Durham County Council. Whilst as I show in figure nine, both Durham County Council and Northumberland County Council have been dispersal areas as early as 2004 and 2009, the number of people they provided support to was limited, suggesting that there were no formal services in place even before 2012 and the privatisation of dispersal services. VPRS was Durham and Northumberland’s first official refugee provision setup. In fact, as participants described Durham County Council, it was a local authority which ‘came at it completely fresh’ (Ava, Interview #10, 3 September 2021). I extend this understanding to Northumberland County Council as well, as interviews suggest that its experience is very similar to that of Durham’s.

Consider the conversation with leading officers Tom and Lucy, on Durham County Council’s set up:

Lucy: before David Cameron, who was then Prime Minister, made that announcement, County Durham hadn't participated in any type of refugee resettlement programme. And so it was new to us. In the early days, we weren't sure how big it was going to be, what the work involved with it was going to be, and indeed, how long we might continue with an approach that is very supportive of refugee resettlement. So in the early days, it was sort of left with God and overseeing it, and [Laura] doing some sort of coordination of the activities to get us into a place where actually we could contribute and we could offer a warm welcome to

refugee arrivals. And how it started was very much about developing a model for County Durham, because a model didn't exist (Interview #22, 30 September 2021).

An important aspect here to highlight, is Durham's initial hesitancy to participate in the VPRS. Not knowing how long they could continue providing 'an approach that is very supportive of refugee resettlement' is indicative of the uncertainty local authorities face when supporting refugees within an environment of austerity and hostility. This hesitancy was also evident with Northumberland County Council which around the same time was also having conversations with the central government regarding its participation in the VPRS. An article from The Chronicle²⁴ (Metcalf, 2016) quotes the Director of Local Services and Housing for Northumberland County Council discussing the ability of the local authority to take part in the VPRS, given the lack of infrastructure to support them:

As there is a lack of existing infrastructure and experience in providing an effective offer, [Northumberland County Council] will need to ensure that we can provide effective support to the scheme to resettle refugees. We are therefore currently considering what would be our capacity as a stock holding authority in terms of accommodation, what support could be offered to those we take and how would this be managed and how suitable support services and infrastructure can be developed (Metcalf, 2016).

The Director's words here, reiterate the reluctance of Northumberland County Council taking part in the VPRS due to their concern for a lack of existing infrastructure that would allow the local authority to provide sufficient support to those resettled via VPRS. In the case of Durham County Council, uncertainty was to an extent improved when they shadowed the 'trailblazers' work:

²⁴ This is a regional newspaper reporting on the latest North East of England news.

Lucy: in our early days, we tried to learn from some of our neighbours. And so, Newcastle and Gateshead, for example, let us shadow their teams, and gave us an insight into what to expect, really, so that our early experiences were as good as they could be....

Tom: I think some authorities are different. Some have stronger service departments. Some authorities have a strong chief execs department. I think we differ from most other councils. Because I think a lot of this work will land in service departments; in a housing department where they've got officers who used to work day to day with vulnerable people. But what we wanted in Durham was to have some central coordination, working alongside the service department. I think that worked well. We have officers to support the families day to day, but they don't have all of the hassle of attending strategic meetings, policy updates from the government, dealing with the ins and outs of the preparation of the houses. The work in advance, the work of putting in funding applications for the money bag... All that is done by [Laura]. And then we'll have a separate team, who are just freed up to go out and support people and get to know them in a way (Interview #22, 30 September 2021).

One aspect to highlight here is Durham County Council's need to set itself apart from other councils who were also hosting the VPRS. The emphasis that Durham is different and because of that its set-up of the scheme must be different was quite prominent throughout our conversation. This may be rooted in the competitive nature of neoliberal governmental policies that were enforced on local authorities. Whilst the incentive to be better may not necessarily be financially driven, the constant performance culture local authorities were subjected to by the Local Area Agreements originally initiated by Conservative governments but also maintained by Blair's government may have contributed to an overall sentiment of performance competition between local authorities which was also extended to the enactment of VPRS (Cochrane, 1993, Etherington, 2020). An important way that Durham was setting itself apart from other councils was how it coordinated around the term 'vulnerability'. Other

local authorities like Gateshead, Newcastle and Hartlepool, relied to some extent on other departments within the local authority who worked with ‘vulnerable’ people within the existing community. Durham chose to create a team that would be specifically hired for the application and practice of the VPRS. Nevertheless, this was an approach that Northumberland County Council also followed in their participation in the VPRS and therefore was not as unique as Durham participants made it out to be. Consider the abstract below where Susan, a leading officer of Northumberland County Council, articulates this:

But my understanding would be that there was no formalised process, certainly, you know, until the [VPRS] came to light, we live in a place that isn't particularly ethnically diverse, or it hasn't been. So you know, we're not a big Metropolitan Borough like Manchester or London, where there is a great deal of experience around these things. I think it was newer to our authority. But hats off to them. You know, when the scheme came about, it's always been very supported, irrespective of which political party is in power. We've had cross party support throughout (Interview #25, 23 November 2021).

Susan’s words here also reiterate how important the support of local politicians was for the enactment of VPRS in the area. Arguably, it was even more significant for the case of local authorities which were not ‘particularly ethnically diverse’ as partnerships with infrastructure might have required more encouragement than in other local authorities such as the ‘trailblazers’. This highlights the challenges local authorities that ‘came at it completely fresh’ might have faced in the North East in comparison to the ‘trailblazers’ but also the North East as whole in comparison to regions with larger, more diverse and experienced in refugee provision local authorities like Manchester or London.

One of the challenges Susan and her team at Northumberland County Council faced was communication with the VCS in the area working with asylum seekers arriving at the same

time as VPRS refugees on the availability of the VPRS funding pot. Colleagues from the VCS found it challenging that the funding the local authority received was specific for the VPRS and that the local authority didn't have 'the funding to work with another cohort, who may come through the asylum-seeking routes to get status' (Susan, Interview #25, 23 November 2021). Susan specified that if they supported the VCS in its provision to asylum seekers or other refugee groups, 'it's not funded work' and that 'it's an add-on to our core function' which was there to enact the VPRS. '[They] do what [they] can' (ibid) she said, but the number of officers in her team were paid from the VPRS's 'funding formula' and it was a matter of deciding if they can 'afford to dedicate part of the [VPRS] funding pot to support a [different] cohort of refugees' (ibid). This exemplifies how ideas about refugee deservingness I have discussed previously become a question of policy implementation, but also how austerity forces different groups of people to be pitted against each other for adequate provision.

Moreover, it shows how local authorities utilised the VPRS funding differently. Whilst some local authorities like Hartlepool Borough Council embedded a significant portion of this funding into existing services like their Children's Services that extended to the local community, but they at least didn't have to 'start from scratch', others like Durham and Northumberland chose to separate those services and make them specific to the VPRS. This exemplifies an element of local authority pragmatism, that allowed local government to use resources as they saw fit whilst mobilizing discretion (Darling, 2022). Despite the challenges these local authorities might have faced in their enactment of the VPRS, the ability to mobilise discretion as they saw fit had an overall positive note on officers enacting the VPRS. Consider what Susan said when I asked her if she feels her and her team were supported enough by central government during their enactment of the scheme:

I don't feel unsupported. We are a smaller authority. And, you know, we take less clients compared to our bigger colleagues, but I have to say that I don't have any real difficulties. For me, everything is good. We are given the funding and structure; we're given a parameter in which to work in. And then we are allowed to make that work in the best way for the clients we support in the communities that we support. So there's flexibility in the programme, which I think is really important (Interview #25, 23 November 2021).

This flexibility, rooted in neoliberal ideology encourages local authorities to find more suitable approaches for them than following how the 'trailblazers' set up the VPRS, praising their independence and creativity. This underscores the service-provision approach at the heart of VPRS, which while providing funding to local government, also creates a space for the insertion of entrepreneurial actors and the professionalisation of refugee protection; a role fulfilled by the VCS in its different guises. This is exemplified by Durham County Council, which was praised by colleagues from the VCS for its creative approach, calling it the 'The Durham System':

My experience of Durham is that it is extremely well organised. But partly because they had control. Some of the other authorities were used to not having control through the asylum seeker system and they did not realise how much control they could have. Durham came at it completely fresh, and that partnership was really important. I know the churches that engaged very early on with the first refugees who arrived in specific areas. The local churches were there to support them. But I could also ring the police officer/community officer and say we've picked up some concerns in the classes about some verbal abuse and he would immediately go and deal with it. That partnership was really close. And we tried to replicate that in the other areas. The Durham system was an openness to work with others and hear what the rest of us had to say, to be honest (Ava, NECAT officer, Interview #10, 3 September 2021).

This quote underlines the significance of working with others in the political context of austerity. Relations and the creativity to establish relations across organisations, services, local authorities, and refugees, determine how challenges arise and how they are overcome. Thus, this leads to local authorities who are less or more able to make it up along the way. Moreover, Ava's mention of 'control' and how 'authorities were used to not having control through the asylum seeker system', emphasises how austerity has disempowered local authorities and that the VPRS is an opportunity to re-establish that authority. However, that authority is reliant on the partnerships that the local authorities can establish across different areas.

Arguably, within the context of austerity approaches like 'The Durham System' are the most effective for the enactment of VPRS. Especially for local authorities starting services 'from scratch' or those that 'came at it completely fresh'. This can be demonstrated by the case of North Tyneside Council and the experience of Anna, one of the support workers of VPRS for the local authority:

when I joined, we were in the housing department, but our manager was the manager of the whole of the housing department. He was our main manager for VPRS, but he was also responsible for housing. There has not been a team for VPRS until recently. Now we joined the welfare and support team in the housing department. So now, we've got a team leader and manager, who are both involved. It's not the sole thing that they are involved. But they now have a lot more involvement in VPRS. I think it's nice that now we are in a proper team. And even though they're not specifically involved in VPRS, we can ask them a lot of questions (Interview #28, 24 September 2021).

To summarise, a third group of local authorities enacting the VPRS in the North East were those that chose a completely different approach to the 'trailblazers' despite shadowing them.

These local authorities had limited if any formal services in place prior to VPRS and for this reason they chose to set up independent teams specific for the enactment of the VPRS. From the local authorities I interviewed, Durham County Council and Northumberland County Council exemplify this category. Due to their lack of experience in refugee provision, this category of local authorities was hesitant in taking part in the enactment of the VPRS. This hesitance was largely rooted in the context of austerity and the hostility fostered by central government towards migration in previous years. In this instance, support from local politicians for the enactment of VPRS was crucial for setting up partnerships for necessary infrastructure in the area for refugees. I argue that in the case of local authorities starting ‘from scratch’ and those who ‘came at it completely fresh’ the most effective way in the aftermath of austerity to enact the VPRS is by creating teams specifically for the operations of the scheme despite the challenges that the local authority might face with working with other groups of refugees. Through the partnerships they set up this way, they can then start expanding their services to other ‘vulnerable’ groups within their community.

Conclusion

The above accounts show that within one region, local authorities can have different experiences and approaches to their participation as hosts of the VPRS; in implementing these approaches, they learn and adapt them to best suit the needs within their areas. For ‘trailblazers’, this meant drawing from existing infrastructure in place both externally and internally within the operations of the council. These operations were not necessarily in place for refugees or asylum seekers, but they were established in teams, like the housing team in Gateshead Council that had experience working with other ‘vulnerable’ groups within the North East population. Meanwhile, Durham County Council and Northumberland County Council were local authorities that ‘came at it completely fresh’ and decided to set separate

teams both internally and externally that would be specific for the operations of the VPRS. This provided clarity on the responsibilities of the service providers that would enable a smoother enactment of the scheme. Arguably, this allowed Durham County Council to also focus on growing their infrastructure in a way that ensured that most areas of support would be available. Finally, Hartlepool was a local authority that despite its attempts to draw from existing infrastructure from teams working with other ‘vulnerable’ groups within their community, mirroring the ‘trailblazer’ approach. But as these services were in smaller teams, they were not able to catch up with the levels of demand. Arguably, since there is funding that the council ‘can tap into’ as Eleanor has pointed out, an approach like those who ‘came at it completely fresh’ might be more suitable for the needs of the council. Nevertheless, this may create tensions between existing teams who due to austerity have probably undergone significant budget cuts and a newly created team specifically targeting the needs of refugees in the area might bring dissatisfaction to other teams within the council. This was exemplified by Susan’s team in Northumberland, and the challenges they faced explaining to colleagues in the VCS who picked up the support for other cohorts of refugees or asylum seekers coming to the local authority separately from the VPRS.

The reason for these different approaches is three-fold. First, is the diverse landscape of experience local government can have with the UK refugee system, which was shown by the variety of enactment described in the earlier sections. The diverse landscape of experience of local government within the North East and their approaches to the VPRS can further hold lessons about timing of the VPRS. Austerity has devastated communities in the North East of England, confirming what Cooper and Whyte (2017) and Tyler (2020) argue about the violence of austerity and the stigmatization of the ‘vulnerable’ and marginal groups in society as a result. Austerity policies were designed in such a way that they targeted the most ‘vulnerable’ and marginal groups in society, hitting them harder than any other income group.

Where the state once provided essential protection for ‘vulnerable’ groups, now ‘vulnerable’ groups are at risk of harm and violence. Interestingly, whilst the VPRS was introduced within this environment, local authorities were quite responsive to this call. This may be due to the coexistence of austerity and solidarity. In this chapter I have shown how the ongoing cuts to public spending have affected severely decision making at the local level, with local politicians and civil servants attempting to redistribute resources, whilst cutting down social provisions from ‘vulnerable’ groups of people (Tyler, 2020). This exemplifies the ‘economies of abandonment’ (2011, p.186) Povinelli described in talking about the ‘modes of exhaustion and endurance [caused by neoliberalism] that are ordinary, chronic, and cruddy’(p.132) and have been slowly decaying communities for decades. Participation in the VPRS was a way to overcome these economies of abandonment and rebuild those provisions through the infrastructure they would make available for resettled refugees, exemplifying how vulnerability can be used as a resource. As I show in the chapter that follows, a second reason for the local authorities’ responsiveness to the enactment of the VPRS was solidarity, which I discuss through the VCS. The Syrian ‘refugee crisis’ was well publicised in media and communities regardless of experience in refugee provision felt obliged to help. This allowed some areas to tap into resources provided through the efforts of civil society and in collaboration with them. Finally, is the flexibility central government has allowed with funding and the ability for individual local authorities to use this funding as they think best. This is an approach solidifying neoliberal ideology in immigration policies, which nonetheless, has allowed local authorities to fill in holes that were previously opened with austerity. Consequently, here is an element of local authority pragmatism, that allows local government to use resources as they see fit whilst mobilizing discretion.

Chapter 6-The VCS and its response to the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe

Introduction

In 2015 many refugees were entering Europe, fleeing conflicts in Syria and Libya and political instability in Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Iraq. Policymakers, politicians and the media referred to this as the ‘refugee crisis’. As outlined in chapter three, whilst many people did seek to enter Europe during that time, the crisis was not an issue of numbers but of the legitimacy and solidarity of European Union member states providing sufficient refugee protection. By choosing to expand the VPRS rather than participate in the European Union’s Refugee Relocation Scheme, the UK, as a member state, contributed to the crisis of legitimacy and solidarity. The institutional solidarity lacking at the nation-state level, both in European countries and in the UK, could be found within the VCS as a sudden increase of civic solidarity, i.e., initiatives by civil society towards refugees and asylum seekers (Augustin and Jorgensen, 2019). These initiatives took many forms, including organised hosting networks, food and clothes donations, language courses and legal assistance amongst others (Maestri and Monforte, 2020).

Redirecting the focus on the North East, at this time the ‘trailblazers’ Newcastle and Gateshead, discussed in the previous chapter, were tasked by the North East Migration Partnership (NEMP) to pilot VPRS in the North East of England. Nevertheless, the piloting of VPRS in the region made evident the difficulties of restricting refugee support to only one group, conflict and specific categories of ‘vulnerability’. This provided a moment for a more forceful entry of VCS actors in the field of refugee reception, providing a frame for expanding refugee support in terms of the identity of target populations, size of targeted populations, actors involved, and temporal scope. In doing so, it provided an opportunity to

further and expand the links between austerity responses and reception, and to shift the politics of reception out of the frame of EU solidarity and into a national one. For these reasons, this chapter will focus on VCS, the second actor involved with VPRS since its inception, which is particularly relevant for showing these processes. This chapter will analyse the different solidarity responses I identified through my interviews with the VCS in the North East of England. In this chapter, I adopt the tripartite understanding of solidarity I outlined in chapter two, proposed by Augustin and Jørgensen (2019) that encompasses the following forms of solidarity: autonomous solidarity, civic solidarity and institutional solidarity. I also understand these responses as cases of solidarity that are a relational practice and therefore lived and embodied rather than abstract and symbolic (Jennings, 2018).

I will unpack these responses to solidarity through my discussion of the three VCS groups operating in the region. The first group are the charities existing prior to 2015 which to survive the 2008 austerity cuts had to create partnerships with each other. The second group are the new charities that were founded in 2015 in response to the growing demand of services from the increasing number of people in the region. The third group is the church in the region redirecting its aims in response to the increasing number of people in the region from 2015 onwards.

Based on my findings, the most prominent forms of solidarity in the context of the VCS in the North East, are civic solidarity and institutional solidarity, which co-existed in different extents across the three VCS groups operating in the region. I did not observe from interview material a case of autonomous solidarity practised by the VCS, underlining how the VCS reinforces the selective inclusion of refugees through the criterion of ‘vulnerability’ dictated by the state. I consider civic and institutional solidarity in the case of the VPRS as an extension to Baglioni et al’s (2020) framing of the ‘grassroots solidarity’ (p.182) they identify in Brexit Britain; a bottom up, self-organised solidarity often in partnership with austerity-

stricken local government, in opposition to top-down, anti-solidarity policies against dependency and deservingness that are driven by hostility rather than welcome. The institutional and civic solidarity in the North East were significantly shaped by VPRS which not only redirected the aims of the church but was created to outsource services for local authorities with limited or no infrastructure to care for refugees in their remit. Through these observations I also note that civic solidarity is not one directional and that the VCS can initiate the process of local authority participation.

Pre-existing charities and their new partnership

A first group of the VCS I found operating in the region during my interviews were the small number of charities that existed prior to 2015. The charities that were prominent from my interviews were the West End Refugee Service (WERS), the North of England Refugee Service (NERS) and the Red Cross, which were all running from the city of Newcastle. As I have shown in the earlier chapter, Newcastle City Council alongside Gateshead Council were assigned to pilot the enactment of VPRS due to their previous experience in refugee provision in the area. This experience was significantly shaped by the charities that were running in the area prior to 2015.

NERS established in 1989 and WERS in 1999, alongside the Red Cross, are three of the first and oldest running refugee and asylum seeker-specific infrastructure of the VCS in the North East of England. These charities were set up in the spirit of a VCS that is stepping in, filling in the gaps and caring for refugees and asylum seekers years before the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe emerged in 2015. In particular, the VCS has been important in supporting those in the UK asylum system who are experiencing poverty and destitution (Mayblin and James, 2018). NERS for example, was founded by a single male refugee who found himself in Newcastle and wanted to help other asylum seekers and refugees arriving in the region (Mohamed, Interview #13, 28 October 2020). Similarly, WERS started when Newcastle became a main

dispersal city when the Asylum Dispersal System was still a very new practice (Jessica, Interview #15, 7 January 2021). At the time quite large numbers of people were arriving in Newcastle from hotter countries from the continent of Africa, with not enough warm clothes (ibid). A single woman, who would later become the founder of WERS, set up a clothing store in her garage to help people access warmer clothes (ibid). Since then, both WERS and NERS have grown quite significantly, offering a range of integrated services on issues asylum seekers and refugees in the area are facing. Issues include poverty, isolation, housing, accessing benefits and the health care system amongst others²⁵.

Austerity cuts in 2008, the ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015 and the government’s ongoing ‘hostile environment’ have significantly pressured the charities’ services the last 10 years. Participants from both NERS and WERS, emphasised that their services are strained by the increased levels of poverty they have been seeing the last 10 years. As emphasized by Jessica, a leading officer from WERS, this is ‘a different type of poverty’ (Interview #15, 7 January 2021), which is strained further by the lack of funding available to charities from the government. Mohamed, a leading officer from NERS described how governmental funding is ‘all wiped out now’ (Interview #13, 28 October 2020). When NERS started in 1989, the government used to give them a grant to run their services. During the 2000s they had a contract with the Home Office’s ‘One Stop Service’, which under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 provided all asylum seekers in the North East of England with support. Today, ‘[NERS] may get the occasional grant from the local authority but nothing else’ (ibid). Similarly, Jessica explained that

²⁵ At the time of the interviews NERS had 12 paid members of staff and WERS 8 paid members of staff. WERS mentioned that 80 volunteers were working with them at the time. NERS did not specify an exact number. Notably, up until 2011 NERS had 65 paid members of staff.

[WERS] has seen subtle cuts in statutory services. Things like access to interpreters or supporters and accessing Job Centre services have all been shaved off and the culture has changed for that. [Statutory services] are not easy places to work and go to. [Statutory services have] become harsher and more hostile. This has put more pressure on our services (Interview #15, 7 January 2021).

What participants from NERS and WERS emphasise is the scale of cuts to public spending and the resilience of the VCS that has been tested and compelled to quickly reform to survive (Jones et al, 2015). Indeed, in response to the pressure placed on their services the last 10 years by austerity cuts, the increased demand of refugee and asylum seeker specific services from the growing number of people arriving in the North East and the hostile environment, NERS, WERS and the Red Cross, established a partnership to work together on a fund they receive from Newcastle City Council:

By working in partnership, it [...] allowed us to apply for funding from the Newcastle [City Council] fund. And very sensibly, funders are very keen if people are working in partnership. You can get more for the clients if you work that way. We have worked with NERS and the Red Cross for years but now we have really solidified and formalized what we do. And we were able to get [our work] funded because of that partnership (Jessica, Interview #15, 7 January 2021).

Neoliberal policies introduced by the government during the austerity cuts that were made in 2008 encouraged a 'market' for charity provision which increased competition and the need for charities to grow into 'distinctive brands' for the services they provided (Cronin and Edwards, 2021; Lang, 2013). In the case of the charities I met in Newcastle, this was clear in the language participants used during interviews to refer to the refugees and asylum seekers to whom they provided services to. The term 'client' for example, was used often

underscoring a corporate side to the charities' work, which was also seen in the earlier chapter with local authorities. The influence of the neoliberal discourse is also exemplified by the procedural aspects of the disbursement of welfare through the partnership frame Jessica outlined when I asked her about the coordination of this partnership:

We ask a lot of questions when someone registers with us or presents us with a problem. We have lots of notes in our file and we will talk explicitly with that person on whether they have been anywhere else and the support that they got already. It can be that often problems can't be solved quickly and very understandably people get frustrated. [Destitute] clients, to come to us [for example], they must be referred to us by NERS. We don't assess someone's situation here. They are assessed at [NERS] and then they come to us if they need long term destitution support [or] to the Red Cross if they need short term support (Interview #15, 7 January 2021).

The partnership between NERS, WERS and the Red Cross is a clear example of the VCS in the North East of England filling in the gaps and attempting to care for refugees and asylum seekers in a region that is lacking sufficient provision. In this instance, this caregiving is withdrawn, recreated, and constantly adjusted depending on the institutional, cultural and political settings at the national level. For example, there were instances where NERS and WERS attempted to get directly involved with the VPRS being implemented in the region. In a specific case, NERS sent a group of its officers to advise one of the local authorities with limited experience in refugee provision, who were trying to enact the scheme in their area but had a limited VCS in their remit to support this attempt (Mohamed, Interview #13, 28 October 2020). NERS were involved with that until the local authority received the first group of people (ibid). However, after that the local authority decided they no longer needed any further support with the scheme and as a result NERS was not involved with the delivery

of the scheme itself (ibid), meaning that the charity did not initiate specific responses or changes to their services to accommodate the scheme.

There are two forms of solidarity that are clear in the case of these charities. First, is a form of ‘civic solidarity’ like that identified by Agustin and Jørgensen (2019) as emerging elsewhere in Europe during and after the ‘refugee crisis’. In accordance with this form of solidarity, WERS, NERS and the Red Cross provided initiatives like food and clothes donations, language courses and legal aid with the idea that vulnerabilities like hunger, poverty, lack of English language and understanding of legal rights would be somewhat eliminated. Nevertheless, such initiatives of solidarity are often limited by the operational conditions charities find themselves in (Durán Mogollón et al, 2021). In Germany and Greece for example, regardless of national context, successful solidarity initiatives such as the above were associated with a high and steady budget, a dense network of collaboration and consultancy status and a reduced geographical scope (ibid). To maintain the budget and reputational status ‘a certain degree of organisational formalisation’ (ibid, p.323) was required. The NERS, WERS and Red Cross partnership in the North East can be seen as an example of an ‘organizational formalization’ (Durán Mogollón et al, 2021, p.323) of the services they were already providing to refugees and asylum seekers in the region, which were threatened by austerity and the hostile environment. This shift in how the charities provide services within the context of austerity and hostility can also be identified as a regime of care similar to that discussed by Ticktin (2011). Morally driven humanitarians, volunteers and activists working with NERS, WERS and the Red Cross are led into ““doing” politics despite not having a political mandate’ (Ticktin, 2010, p.10), unable to extract themselves from the neoliberal discourse they find themselves in. Moreover, the organisational formalisation NERS, WERS and the Red Cross had to embrace due to the neoliberal policies and the lack of funding, can be understood as a case of institutional solidarity. Operating

within the institutional field of welfare provision, the charities' formalisation and partnership can be understood as a mechanism of survival against the austerity cuts made in this field. In this sense, civic solidarity also included/necessitated a level of institutionalisation.

To summarise, a first group of the VCS running in the region were the small number of charities that existed prior to 2015. My interviews identified WERS, NERS and the Red Cross as the most prominent examples for the region, which were all based in Newcastle, one of the 'trailblazers' I identified in the previous chapter. NERS, WERS and the Red Cross have been extremely important in filling in the gaps of care not provided by the welfare state especially since Newcastle became an Asylum Dispersal city in 1999. The last 10 years, the charities' services have been significantly pressured due to the 2008 austerity cuts, the 2015 'refugee crisis' and the government's ongoing 'hostile environment', with participants emphasising how they have been dealing with increased levels of poverty. This has led the charities forming a partnership that allowed them to work together on a fund offered by Newcastle City Council. This partnership exemplified how neoliberal policies introduced by the government during the austerity cuts made in 2008 have forced the VCS into a 'market' of service provision. I identified two forms of solidarity in the case of these charities. First, the civic solidarity identified elsewhere in response to the 'refugee crisis' in Europe, which aimed to eliminate the vulnerabilities that prevent people from integrating in society. Second, the institutional solidarity created because of the formalisation and regime of care, which has been fostered through the partnership they created because of neoliberal policy. Close examination of the processes taking place over time, however, has shown that the two forms are both related and intersecting. This is seen even more clearly in the case of the new charities.

New charities

A second group from the VCS operating in the region were the new charities that were founded from 2015 onwards as a direct response to the growing demand of services the increasing numbers of people created. This was particularly clear in local authorities with limited or no earlier VCS infrastructure in place to care for refugees and asylum seekers in their remit. Drawing from my interviews with the VCS, such an example was Northumberland County of Sanctuary. A charity, that was part of the wider City of Sanctuary movement in the UK, which was purposefully set up in 2016 to care for asylum seekers who were dispersed in Northumberland County for the first time and there was a lack of infrastructure to support them. This is the account of Ben, Secretary, and Trustee at the time, for Northumberland County of Sanctuary recounting how the charity as a first form of refugee and asylum seeker providing infrastructure for Northumberland County was set up:

We were founded in December 2016; it's almost exactly four years ago now, in response to the influx of asylum seekers to Northumberland. SE Northumberland. This is the first time that asylum seekers have been dispersed north of Newcastle, except to Scotland, which is a different thing. North of Newcastle and South of Scotland. They were beginning to come in quite considerable numbers and so the person who's now the chair, took the initiative of calling people to decide if we wanted to form an organization that would be of assistance to asylum seekers. It developed from there. In November 2016 we had a preliminary meeting in Newbiggin and that went very well. We then went on and said yes, we would form an organization to help asylum seekers. We arranged to have an inaugural meeting, we had this in Morpeth, and we were founded just as an organization then. We went ahead working in Ashington about that time, in which was the main sort of area the asylum seekers were coming (Interview #12, 29 October 2020).

The setup of Northumberland County of Sanctuary is doubly important because, as I have mentioned in the earlier chapter, at the same time, there were also conversations between the central government and the local authority about its participation in the VPRS. The setup of the charity would prove invaluable for the services that needed to be considered before the local authority would decide to take part in the VPRS. The services provided by the charity were not to replace the infrastructure the local authority had to setup for the services it had to provide itself for the enactment of the VPRS. However, the case of the ‘trailblazers’ suggest that having VCS services setup alongside the services provided by the local authority were not only going to fill in any gaps in the provision of care the local government failed to consider in the setup of the scheme but also provide invaluable guidance in the services that the local authority was to setup for the operations of the VPRS. This can be exemplified by the case I discussed earlier, where NERS supported one of the least experienced local authorities in its preparations to welcome refugees through the VPRS since the area itself lacked refugee- or asylum seeker- specific VCS support.

Other charities were initially setup for the enactment of VPRS in their area rather than the arrival of asylum seekers. Such an example is Darlington Assistance for Refugees (DAR). Going back to figure nine, the numbers suggest that Darlington Borough Council was a local authority with some experience with refugee provision from Asylum Dispersal, but limited if any, pre-existing refugee infrastructure in place both within the local authority but also the VCS. Fran, a citizen moved by the coverage of the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe by the media recounts her experience founding DAR:

In 2015 I got a group of people together on the Facebook page because of the war in Syria and the reports that were coming through. It was such a heavy burden on me and some of my friends and when that picture of Alan Kurdi was found... when it was put on the newspapers,

it was like the final straw for me and some of my friends. We decided there was no longer the possibility to do nothing. We had to do something (Interview #3, 27 October 2020).

Fran's account mirrors the feelings of shame and responsibility found at the nation-state level that I discussed in chapter three. As suggested by Armbruster (2019), in this instance, Alan Kurdi's photographs not only affected a policy change but also shamed citizens into a pro-refugee activism:

Not long after, Yvette Cooper²⁶ suggested that every local authority should take 10 families to help stop people from making those dangerous journeys through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. We approached our council and asked them to welcome refugees. Round about the same time, I got involved with Citizens UK and they offered some free training for refugee welcome groups, which I went along to in London. Then in October of 2015 I went to Calais to take some supplies and it just made me realize that I was just so ashamed for the lack of help. I thought we needed to make people more welcome. So we set up Darlington Assistance for Refugees (Fran, Interview #3, 27 October 2020).

Fran's initiative to propose to Darlington Borough Council, to host the VPRS suggests that participation in the VPRS is not one directional. That is, participation does not necessarily come from central government to local authorities and then outsourced to VCS. Fran's case shows that the VCS can start the process too. This underscores a case of solidarity that intersects between civic and institutional solidarity based on the Augustin and Jørgensen (2019) framework I adopt for this thesis. This is because the process of civic solidarity that can be observed, (i.e. a concerned citizen engaging with their local community to help eliminate the vulnerabilities of refugees) is moving upwards rather than laterally with the VCS stepping in or being outsourced, towards an activation of institutional mechanisms (i.e.

²⁶ At the time, Yvette Cooper was serving as Shadow Home Secretary for the UK government.

VPRS funding and local authority infrastructure). Therefore, whilst Fran's actions are citizen-initiated (which indicates civic solidarity), its fulfilment requires institutional cooperation (which indicates institutional solidarity). This further underscores the ways in which civic and institutional solidarity intersect through which vulnerability is used as a resource.

Moreover, the two charity cases I presented emphasize the difference between the civic solidarity initiatives of citizens for localities in destination countries such as the UK, versus hotspots like the islands of Lesbos (Greece) or Lampedusa (Italy). In Lesbos and Lampedusa, a steady stream of spontaneous volunteers, foreign, local islanders or from the mainland of Greece or Italy, would arrive on the islands to help manage the humanitarian crisis that was unfolding (Haaland and Wallevik, 2019; Buribye and Mydland, 2018; Friese, 2010).

Eventually, civic solidarity was replaced with large scale NGOs, with the first volunteers replaced or not considered for the new paid jobs (ibid). In the North East there was no such inflow of external volunteers. The care provided is picked up by people within the community, who, affected by the narrative of the 'refugee crisis' or the settlement of refugees in their area, are mobilized into initiatives of civic solidarity. These initiatives predominantly reflect the examples of civic solidarity discussed earlier such as hosting networks and clothing or food donations amongst others, but Fran's case also shows the intersection of civic and institutional solidarity that can include initiatives where citizens suggest that their local authority participates in the VPRS. Lastly, it should be noted that five years after our interviews, all new charities I interviewed still exist. They have not been replaced by larger scale NGOs and for many their websites report that the first volunteers I interviewed are still working with the charity and have taken up more responsibilities related to their roles. This suggests that first volunteers in the North East stay, found and grow charities alongside local government to enhance the limited infrastructure in the region.

To conclude, the second group of VCS I identified in the North East consists of the new charities that were founded after 2015 in response to the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe. I presented two examples for this section. First, Northumberland County of Sanctuary which was founded in response to the increasing number of asylum seekers arriving in Northumberland County. Northumberland County had never received asylum seekers or refugees in the past and thus, there was no previous evidence of VCS in the area to care for these arrivals. The case of Northumberland County of Sanctuary exemplifies the civic solidarity initiatives discussed at the start of this chapter, which were designed to address the vulnerabilities in the area. The second example was Darlington Assistance for Refugees. This was a charity that was initiated to outsource support from the local authority after it decided to participate in the VPRS. This is a case that is set apart from the usual initiatives of civic solidarity further underscoring how civic solidarity can intersect with institutional solidarity, and highlighting that civic solidarity is not one directional as VCS can initiate the process of local authority participation in the VPRS too. This exemplifies how vulnerability in the context of the VCS can be used as a resource.²⁷ This case also underlined the differences between civic solidarity initiatives in destination countries such as the UK versus hotspots of the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe.

The church and a redirection of its aims

The final group playing a significant role in the VCS refugee provision in the North East since 2015 are churches. Overall, churches in the North East of England play a very significant role in pro-refugee activism²⁷. This is by either providing charities and other groups with spaces to hold meetings and drop-ins or by raising money and accepting clothing

²⁷ There is a relative lack of religious diversity in the North East, making the church the dominant religious institution in the region.

donations. Thus, they encourage and support the typical civic solidarity initiatives discussed earlier. North East Churches Acting Together (NECAT) is particularly interesting in its dual capacity as a representation of churches in the North East but also as a registered charity itself and its contribution to the limited VCS infrastructure specific to refugees and asylum seekers in the North East of England. Here is the account of Ava, a NECAT officer:

to be honest, working with asylum seekers and refugees wasn't particularly in our initial remit up until the end of 2014. In context of 2015 and the Syrian crisis. Up until then this wasn't in our remit at all. There were churches working with refugees and asylum seekers, but we had other things to look at. But at that point questions were asked about churches and how best we could support the refugees fleeing Syria and brought to this country. How we would best organise collections. All these questions started to come up at that point and that was when we started to think of a connection between the different charities and local authorities. So, we started to have those conversations (Interview #10, 3 September 2021).

The key point to highlight here is how the churches were not prepared to support the North East with the arrival of refugees in the region in 2015. This is because they were concerned with other 'vulnerable' groups of people within the community, such as those experiencing homelessness and destitution amongst others. As a result, they had to put things together quickly, learning on the go, and moving from ontological questions concerned with the role of the churches, to practical ones such as best ways of support and collections. This was a movement that quickly led to the creation of networks. This is how Ava describes the work of NECAT to support refugees coming to the North East:

Initially, it was about connecting people and seeing who was doing what and then from there, because I live in Durham, the local authority for County Durham, not being part of the asylum system dispersal scheme but was in discussion to be part of the refugee Syrian

resettlement programme. And they asked for support from the churches. And I became the church representative on the humanitarian partnership which is the groups that looks at refugees and asylum seekers. So that was my initial connection with that. That developed into churches getting together to discuss the issues, arrange the collections, and engage churches in helping to run English classes and drop ins. It was more of a coordination role and working very closely with Durham and Durham, Northumberland, Teesside Cities of Sanctuary, Action Foundation and others who worked with asylum seekers and refugees (Interview #10, 3 September 2021).

Historically, churches in Europe and the UK have been at the forefront of caregiving for refugees and asylum seekers alongside charities and local government. Existing literature has already identified how during the ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015 several churches across Europe partnered with local authorities to support refugee provision. Ideström and Linde (2019) for example, underline how the church in Sweden led together with local authorities temporary accommodation for young asylum seekers. Ava’s discussion of what NECAT did to support refugees coming to the North East, provide a further example of the partnerships churches established with local government to care for the refugees arriving in the area in 2015 and the civic solidarity initiatives that were introduced. This partnership also exemplifies a case of institutional solidarity in the formalisation of the care NECAT would be offering to refugees arriving in the area that connect the civil society arena with the one of policy-making. This is because without NECAT’s partnership with Durham County Council, which ‘came at it completely fresh’ and needed to establish VCS infrastructure in their remit to help them enact the VPRS, the churches’ significant role in mapping and creating networks that were essential for refugee and asylum seeker integration in the North East would have been delayed or not as strong.

Liz, a Reader in a County Durham church and a volunteer for NECAT recounts her work related to the refugee families in the region through the charity:

I'm well retired as you can see. I haven't got official work with anybody now. The connection that I have with the group of refugees in this area is because I am a Reader in the Church of England. I was given the information of the families settling in to our immediate area from the Churches Together in the North East. When this group of people settled in this area, the representative of Churches Together asked if we would through the churches in the area, Church of England but also Methodist, offer any support. Little things like kettles, sheets to help them start off. Things like that. Accommodation was also offered by the church that was very near to where these people were living, for them to meet, to have conversation classes (Interview #11, 8 September 2021).

As with the new charities discussed earlier, churches in this instance, were actively collaborating with local government to welcome refugees whilst the hostile environment discussed in chapter three was still prevailing at the level of central government. This was replicated elsewhere in Europe, but not without exceptions. In Poland for example, the right-wing government's increasing hostility towards Muslim refugees, negatively influenced the mobilisation of the Polish Catholic Church towards pro-refugee activism (Narkowicz, 2018). Despite the Vatican's encouragement for refugee support from Catholic churches in Europe, the increased hostility of the Polish government placed the Polish Catholic Church in a conflicting position which prevented it from embracing a welcoming environment towards refugees (ibid). Pędziwiatr (2018) in a study conducted in Polish seminaries, also found that even though priests in training were overall agreeing with the Vatican in theory on the welcoming of refugees, when interviewed, a preference was identified towards Christian refugees if any refugees were to be accepted into the country, contributing to the

strengthening of a hegemonic representation of Muslims as Others, embraced by the Polish government.

Hostility in the North East of England was also evident in many of the communities, refugees were resettled in, through the VPRS. However, as highlighted by NECAT²⁸, churches, consolidating their long history of being supportive of migration and refugee issues, were becoming active members of the VCS and stepping in alongside local government to create a space of care for refugees that would fight incidents of hostility and unwelcome. Even though religious difference was an issue that could lead to discrimination and racist violence, the institution of the church chose a welcoming approach.

In particular, this ‘stepping in’ of the church was happening in areas where infrastructure around refugee welcome was limited. In this case, members of the local church would step in to help and would provide such help across religious lines.

Emma for example, an officer for Communities Together Durham, is married to a Vicar in a not so diverse community in the North East of England. As she describes, the local authority had limited experience in refugee provision, and resettlement ‘was a very new stream of work for them’ (Interview #2, 5 July 2021). The area was very remote and there was no infrastructure in proximity for refugee services and welcome. For this reason, her husband as the local vicar and herself, decided to go and welcome the families alone. That way, they believed that they could start building relationships within the community. However, there was community hostility towards the refugee families. One of the families for example, was very anxious letting their children play outside in the park because of a previous incident of racial abuse, where one of the girls had her headscarf pulled off. Emma and her husband

²⁸ NECAT does not focus on only one strand of Christianity. Instead, as its name suggests, it aims to increase the unity and cooperation between churches from different traditions and celebrate all that the churches do together. This includes Catholicism, Protestantism and Anglican amongst other traditions.

decided to have a meeting and discuss with other congregated churches what they should do. They found a solution in community football for children. They put flyers on people's doors and asked them to join them. They then put chairs outside the football pitch so that the adults would get to know each other. Emma, clearly emotional, emphasised how an elderly lady in her 80s was the one who made the first step. Emma described how the older lady walked towards one of the women and 'kissed her and welcomed her' (ibid). Eight years later, the football pitch is still there every Tuesday to relieve the tensions of hostility from within the community and make refugees feel welcome.

To summarise, the churches played a significant role in refugee support in the North East following 2015. Drawing from my interviews with NECAT, a charity representing churches in the region, I have shown that whilst there were some civic solidarity initiatives from churches in the North East, this was not an organised process. Only after Durham County Council initiated a partnership with the charity to provide a more formalised network of refugee provision from churches across the region, did NECAT experience a shift in the direction of their aims towards a more active role in the caregiving for refugees in the area, exemplifying at the same time a case of institutional solidarity. This was predominantly initiated for VPRS and local authorities with limited if any VCS in their area for refugee support but it would then expand to any refugees and asylum seekers who required care. This was particularly important in areas where refugee welcome was limited.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the three VCS groups I identified operating in the region following the 'refugee crisis' in 2015. By tracing these groups, I also underlined the forms of solidarity that were evident in the region during that time. First, were the NERS, WERS and the Red Cross operating from Newcastle and existing prior to 2015. To survive the 2008 austerity cuts, these

organisations had to create a partnership with each other. Within this group, two forms of solidarity were evident. First, civic solidarity which formalised as a regime of care driven by the neoliberal discourse. Second, institutional solidarity which was fostered through the partnership the charities created because of neoliberal policy.

A second group I identified were the new charities that were founded from 2015 onwards as a direct response to the growing demand of services that the increasing number of people created. I presented two cases for this group. First, was the Northumberland County of Sanctuary which was founded in response to the increasing number of asylum seekers in Northumberland County and second was the Darlington Assistance for Refugees, which was initiated to outsource support for the local authority after it decided to participate in the VPRS. Northumberland County of Sanctuary exemplified a form of civic solidarity that aimed to eliminate the vulnerability of refugees arriving in the area whilst Darlington Assistance for Refugees emphasised that solidarity is not one directional and that the VCS can also initiate the process of local authority participation in the VPRS. This emphasised the intersection of civic solidarity with institutional solidarity but also how vulnerability is used as a resource to create new infrastructure in the area. Through this case I also underlined that civic solidarity responses in destination countries such as the UK are not picked up by external volunteers like in hotspot locations in Europe, but by people within the community who stay and help grow the limited infrastructure in the region alongside local authorities.

Finally, the last group I identified were the churches. Whilst churches in the North East were contributing to the civic solidarity initiatives in the region to some extent, this was not an organised process. Their role as caregivers from 2015 onwards was strengthened after NECAT, a charity representing most churches around the North East of England, established a partnership with Durham County Council, further exemplifying a case of institutional solidarity. This was predominantly initiated for VPRS and local authorities with limited if any

VCS presence in their area for refugee support but it then expanded to any refugees or asylum seekers in the area that required care.

Through describing these forms of VCS work, this chapter has also shown the different forms of solidarity that were evident in the region, highlighting how these often intersected with each other. I did not observe from interview material a case of autonomous solidarity practised by the VCS, i.e. solidarity that is based on radical politics and seeks to enact outside or against the state and its legal frameworks. This reiterates the role of VCS in regimes of care, underlining how the VCS reinforces the selective inclusion of refugees via ‘vulnerability’ as narrated by the state. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the responses discussed in this chapter still represent examples of solidarity that are lived and embodied and therefore should be considered as relational practices that have the potential and capacity to encourage practices that are non-exclusionary and less restrictive in the future.

Chapter 7-Refugees' Experiences of Resettlement

Introduction

Chapters five and six identified how local authorities and the VCS enacted the VPRS in the North East of England. This discussion has shown how these two actors are interrelated and that partnerships between them are vital for a smooth enactment of the VPRS in the region. Nevertheless, the neoliberal framing has significantly affected the way these partnerships are set up. I have shown that different actors adopt the language of neoliberalism to differing extents (people/clients). I have also shown cases where vulnerability is used as a resource for local authorities and the VCS to access funding. This raises the question of how refugees are also socialized into this framing, which I explore later in chapter nine. Moreover, I have shown the connections and division of labour between the different actors. This raises the question of how refugees are positioned in these relations, which I discuss in this chapter. Lastly, different actors apply understandings of vulnerability differently through the scheme, which raises the question of how refugees themselves perceive vulnerability. I explore how the three actors understand vulnerability in chapter eight.

This chapter focuses on the experiences of 13 families resettled in the North East of England via the VPRS. The chapter will focus on the lived experience of arrival, housing provision, learning English and family reunification. These themes reflect the specific pillars of implementation of the VPRS. On all these themes, participants had suggestions for improvement, which I include in the discussion.

Understandings of resettlement

Asked about their experience of the scheme, it is noteworthy that none of the participants named the scheme by its exact name throughout our conversations or found the criterion that

considered them ‘vulnerable’ enough for resettlement. The level of literacy in Arabic, English and legal terminology may be the main reason for this. A significant number of participants resettled in the North East have low levels of literacy in Arabic. This group of participants would also have no English at all. As a result, they would often struggle with formal English even when translated in Arabic for them. Whilst some would have some awareness that they arrived in the UK via some sort of program organized by the UN, others would often ask ‘what scheme?’ (Iqra and Aziz, Interview #38, 19 November 2021). Younger participants would often have better literacy both in Arabic and English and showed more awareness of the scheme although would often refer to it as ‘the scheme’ (Fadi, interview #37, 20 September 2021) or ‘that Syrian Resettlement Scheme’ (Omar, Interview #31, 21 September 2021). The participants who did have a better understanding of the VPRS did not, however, specify through which criterion of ‘vulnerability’ they were resettled. I also did not explicitly ask, as its relevance to the research did not outweigh the possible discomfort that might have been caused.

This suggests that participants’ understanding of the scheme diverge from what the text of the scheme envisions. This is because participants’ understanding of the scheme is shaped by their lived experience of it. As Lems (2018) suggests, this experience can ‘refer to the two modes of experience that often appear in anthropological texts: the act of living through something and the ways we are confronted with reality in an immediate and direct way’ (p.47). I borrow this analysis of experience to show how participants comprehend the VPRS they are personally living through and their direct perceptions of it. My interviews suggest the VPRS is experienced as a series of events and processes consisting of arrival, housing provision, learning English and family reunification.

Arrival

A dominant theme in discussions with all families was arrival. Several participants started their story during our conversations by describing how they boarded a plane from Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq or Egypt, and the difference in temperature they felt once they got off that plane at Newcastle airport. Hiba said:

We came from Lebanon, and it was May. May is summertime in Lebanon. I remember that here it was cold. Sunny, but cold (Interview #36, 16 September 2021).

Aleena on the other hand, highlighted the safety she felt once she got off the plane at Newcastle airport. That she felt safe for herself and her children and assured that there is no war in the UK and her children will go to school with '[n]o harm. No injury' (Interview #33, 27 May 2021). This feeling of safety, brought to some participants like Wajiha, feelings of happiness and excitement:

we were so happy. So excited to come to a country where we can have a vocation, where we are treated as equal. We have a chance for our children to have a good education as well. And people take us all as the same. It was exciting for us, and we were happy to be here. [...]
I was so happy when we arrived at our new home for the first time. Our case worker asked me to hold the door so that she can bring in the bags, but I was so excited that I ran through the door and forgot to keep it open [laughs] (Interview #39, 22 October 2021).

To others like Maryam, leaving their country behind to seek safety brought sadness:

I was hesitant to come...to migrate to the UK. It is not easy to make such a decision. Then I decided to make a good future for my family. When we came the first day it was very difficult for me. I felt like somebody put me in a prison. I couldn't sit down in my house. I would sit on the chair and cry. Cry, cry, cry. I would see the happiness on my family's face, but I was very sad (Interview34, 2 June 2021).

Similarly, Iqra and Aziz described their feelings leaving everything behind. They emphasised that they came to a country that is totally different, and where people speak a different language:

We cried a lot. Every single day we cried. The crying does not stop. And people from the scheme, even though it's been four to five years, they are still supporting us. Offering help. But the feeling leaving everything behind you is not that easy (Iqra, Interview #38, 19 November 2021).

Participants' experience of arrival in the North East of England reveals contradictory feelings of relief, reluctance, sadness and happiness. These narratives speak of arrival as an emotionally dense moment. This is understandable in any migration setting, but in the case of VPRS the feeling of arrival is exacerbated by the circumstances of displacement and vulnerability. These circumstances are given particular attention in literature both from refugee studies and clinical settings that often connects these feelings to mental health issues and foregrounds trauma as a characteristic of refugee experience (Di Tomasso, 2010; El-Bialy and Mulay, 2020; Ryan et al, 2008; Simich et al, 2012). For example, Schweitzer et al (2011), outline how the exposure of newly arrived Burmese refugees in Australia to extensive pre-migration trauma has caused significant psychological distress often showing symptoms of PTSD, anxiety and depression.

Whilst participants' feelings of relief, reluctance, sadness, and happiness could be associated with pre-migration trauma it is important to be careful when associating these feelings to mental illness. According to Alayarian (2007), 'some people report an initial relief when they first arrive in the new country, and others a sense of elation simply because they have escaped from considerable personal danger' (p.15). Therefore, feeling sad, angry, happy or

reluctant to resettle in a new country are all reactions associated with fleeing danger and not necessarily signs of a mental illness.

Approaches to refugee mental health using medical and stress models ‘ignore the social, political, and historical contexts of human suffering, and constructing the individual refugee’s mind as pathological, thus absolving external socio-political causes of their influence’ (El-Bialy and Mulay, 2020, pp.357-358). As El-Bialy and Mulay (2020) suggest, this forces refugees’ experiences of pre-migration within a ‘vulnerability narrative’ that categorically labels refugees as ‘vulnerable to mental illness’ (p.358). Often, this narrative is further applied to post-migration living difficulties met during resettlement (El-Bialy and Mulay, 2020; Sweitzer et al, 2011). Thus, it is important to view these experiences with people’s everyday experiences and struggles in mind, to allow for more forward-looking approaches to become more visible. Based on my interview material, I therefore argue that refugees can have differing experiences of happiness and sadness, they can refer to political oppression but also mention the weather, they can show an awareness of collective but also individual feelings. Thus, it is important not to reduce all these experiences to pathology but to see them as embedded in larger projects of community, and life trajectories.

Work is particularly important in mitigating the stress of the experience of arrival. Mahmoud highlighted how he prefers to work over receiving Universal Credit, as work helps him manage his mental health. In specific, he said:

My work keeps me sane. I can’t sit in the house all day. I need to work (Interview #35, 4 September 2021).

To fully understand the implications of his comment, we need to politically contextualise it within a cultural value system that has developed around Universal Credit. Universal Credit

is a monthly payment from the state which helps individuals on low income, who have lost their job or are unable to work, with living costs (Department for Work and Pensions, 2024). Universal Credit was introduced in 2010 by the Coalition Government to replace several tax credits and benefits. This aimed ‘to reform the benefit system to make it fairer, more affordable, and better able to tackle poverty, worklessness and welfare dependency (Department for Work and Pensions, 2010, p.2). The reform added to the government’s ‘commitment to overhaul the benefit system [and] promote work and personal responsibility’ (ibid). Universal Credit is an exemplary neoliberal measure introduced in the context of austerity that constitutes an assault on vulnerability in the way I have discussed in chapter three, presenting it as dependency.

At the time of writing, to be able to claim Universal Credit one should ‘live in the UK’, ‘be aged 18 or over’, ‘be under State Pension age’, ‘have £16,000 or less in money, savings and investments’ (Department for Work and Pensions, 2024). The standard allowance per month ranged from £311.68 for single individuals under 25 living alone to £393.45 if you are 25 or over (ibid). Adult refugees resettled in the UK are automatically eligible to apply for Universal Credit to help them settle in their new lives. Whilst most refugees do receive Universal Credit in the first few years of their arrival at least, most prefer to work, as it would help them become financially independent and improve their psychological well-being, an observation also made for refugees in other destination countries like Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands (Riemsdijk and Axelsson, 2021).

Speaking of his choice to work, Mahmoud expressed his frustration with the taxation and Universal Credit system. He explained that opting to work rather than claiming Universal Credit ‘pays less’ (Interview #35, 4 September 2021,) with refugees often offered voluntary work as ‘experience’, despite them being skilled workers in their home countries, with the

promise that this would then land them a paying job in the UK. It is important to note here how this exemplifies the precarity of employment under the contemporary neoliberal modernity in the UK. Research by Bloch (2008) shows how refugees who do work often end up in roles with little opportunity to progress, whilst refugees who are highly skilled are not working in roles representative of those skills. Moreover, even if a refugee manages to get a paying role that pays more than Universal Credit, anyone living legally in the country with an annual income of more than £12,570 would need to start paying taxes, which as Mahmoud argues, discourages refugees from entering the job market, with most staying on Universal Credit despite the fact that this affects their mental health and in turn, does not contribute to a positive experience of initial arrival (Interview #35, 4 September 2021).

Mahmoud thus suggested that an improvement to the experience of arrival would be for the government to work on ‘a tax-free scheme’ (ibid) for the first few years following resettlement so that refugees would pursue work until they are better settled and financially ready to contribute to the taxation system. This is a suggestion that if extended to all lower income households that often depend on Universal Credit, could significantly lessen the precarity caused by the current job market in the UK. This underscores the significance of understanding vulnerability as an inherent condition rather than a pathological state, which might lead to more comprehensive approaches to a welfare state that aims to mitigate and not stigmatise the precarity of Others, including, for example, individuals who are sick, living with a disability or are experiencing homelessness amongst others.

Housing provision

When I asked participants *who* helped their families the most to adapt to all the changes they encountered in their first weeks in the UK, the response was unanimous: the local authority.

For most, their experience with the local authority in their first days of arrival was positive and in line with the responsibilities set out by the government. This was regardless of the local authority's previous experience of refugee provision and care that I have shown in chapter five. Most responses made positive references to a support worker assigned to them by the local authority, who often spoke Arabic and could translate for them, had their house ready for them when they arrived, helped them register with a GP, a school, helped them sort out their bills, register for benefits and showed them the area.

For a small minority of families, this experience was not as positive. Aleena and her family arrived in 2016 in a local authority with limited previous experience in refugee provision. They were one of the first families to arrive in that area after the VPRS was enacted by the local authority. When Aleena was asked who helped her family the most when she came to the UK, her response was the local authority. However, when she was asked to elaborate on the help they received as a family she said:

when we first came to England we were put in a terrible [neighbourhood]. It didn't have good people in it. The neighbours used to break the doors. They used to treat us badly. I asked [the local authority] for help but they did nothing. I then asked for help from Middlesbrough Council, and they helped us (Interview #33, 27 May 2021).

Placing refugee families in rural, isolated communities in the North East which have limited previous experience with diversity often placed refugees in a precarious condition. Woods (2018) drawing from research in two rural small towns in Ireland warns of the effects 'precarious rural cosmopolitanism', as he coins it, can have to migrants and specifically asylum seekers and refugees. Precarity can be identified at two stages. First, within a broader cosmopolitan society where individuals of migrant background encounter precarity through 'economic uncertainty and exploitation, limited citizenship rights, and exposure to

harassment and violence’ (ibid, p.174). Second, a precarity ‘to changing economic conditions and shifting political and cultural attitudes both within and outside the locality’ (ibid, p.174). It is the drawbacks of precarious rural cosmopolitanism that Aleena and her family experienced in the local authority in the North East. Not feeling safe to live in the neighbourhood they were resettled in highlights the precarity described by Woods (2018) when exposed to harassment and violence in the locality one is placed.

The family’s precarity was extended further when Aleena asked the local authority who resettled them for alternative housing, but their request was denied. According to Citizens Advice (2023), ‘once you turn down an offer of housing your [local authority] thinks is suitable, they can refuse to find you another home’.²⁹ As a result, they decided to leave the scheme. If families are unhappy with their VPRS provision within the five years of its remit, they can opt out of the advantages of the scheme and move to a different local authority seeking provision as recognised refugees. Aleena’s case was also supported by Arabic Speaking Community Activists residing in Middlesbrough, who with reinforcements from the VCS, managed to move the family within the remits of Middlesbrough Council (Aleena, Interview #33, 27 May, 2021). As discussed in chapter four, Middlesbrough Council is an experienced Asylum Dispersal local authority and the only local authority in the North East which participated in the Gateway Protection Programme up until 2012, which chose not to participate in hosting the VPRS. However, due to its previous experience of refugee provision, required infrastructure, both within the local authority and the VCS such as refugee service providing charities, were in place to support Aleena and her family outside of the VPRS as recognised refugees in need of provision. Nevertheless, this means the family lost a lot of the privileges the scheme provided for them once they arrived in the UK such as

²⁹ This is a note highlighted on the website particularly if you are homeless or in temporary housing.

secure housing, a support worker for the first one to two years of their arrival and organised ESOL classes. Access to benefits and applications to social housing were not affected but the family needed to join the exceptionally long waiting list alongside UK nationals.

Maryam, who was resettled in a different local authority with limited infrastructure, had a similar experience of harassment in the location where she was housed:

My neighbour and one of his friends would enter our back yard, drunk, looking around. I mentioned this to the police multiple times, but the neighbour and his friend just kept coming back (Interview #34, 2 June 2021).

I had the chance to interact with Maryam several times after this initial interview. The reason for these meetings was to try and understand the social housing system in the North East. At the end of every interview, I asked participants if they have any questions. On this occasion, Maryam asked me if I knew what COMPASS, was. COMPASS is a website where people in the Tees Valley can bid for available social housing. Oblivious to its existence at the time, I answered in the negative. Maryam then asked me whether I could have a look at COMPASS's website and help her understand the social housing system in the North East so that she could be more competitive with her housing applications. In 2018, two years after Maryam first arrived in the North East and after consulting with the council, she was directed to apply for new social housing via this platform, which follows 'a partnership approach of local authorities and registered providers offering access to council and housing association homes for rent, swap and ownership across the Tees Valley' (Hartlepool Now, 2023). In 2021 when Maryam and I first spoke, she had still not secured a new house because she was struggling to understand the application and how the social housing system worked even though the level of her English was competent. She had already asked the council for help but even though willing to help her, it was over the phone and they always 'repeated in the same

polite tone the process' which she did not understand. Not confident in my understanding of the social housing system in the UK myself, I promised I would read on it and would come back to her. This is an extract from my fieldnotes trying to make sense of COMPASS:

The [COMPASS] website is confusing and slightly outdated and if you don't have an account set up, there is no sufficient information given to you about the system. Frustrating![...] I am concerned about the website. If I am struggling to access and understand the information of the website with arguably, a high level of English, experience working with legal and governmental documents/websites [having worked in a law office in a previous life] and good digital literacy, how can an individual who just arrived in the country with limited English and experience of legal terminology be competitive enough to be successful in such an application process? (Fieldnotes diary, 3 June 2021).

After a few days of reading, COMPASS started making more sense. COMPASS works with a process called 'bidding,' where depending on your chosen criteria you can 'bid' for the available properties in every given cycle of applications. Bidding requires proactiveness, a good understanding of the COMPASS system and working swiftly. Once you have applied, your 'bid' is prioritised depending on the band you are in and your need for a property, having issues with your neighbours being in the second lowest priority category. This is another excerpt from my fieldnotes from when I called Maryam to discuss what I learnt:

I video called Maryam. She was so smiley when she responded to my call! Laughing, she asked me if I managed to tackle the 'monster' of COMPASS. Laughing myself, I told her that I tried and asked if she is okay with me sharing my screen. We went over the website and the application steps together. I explained to her that she needs to be swift in her bidding and to apply even if a house is not perfect. When we were going over the website, I felt that I was just repeating what was on the website, but Maryam said that that was exactly what she

needed someone to do. Sit down with her and show her step by step so that she can write it down. What button to press, how to narrow down her housing criteria and when the next bidding cycle was starting since she was never sure about the date. She then thanked me, telling me how grateful she is that someone had finally sat down and went through the website with her (Fieldnotes diary, 6 June 2021).

Nevertheless, in a catch-up call a few months later, she was telling me how difficult it still was to find social housing even though she now understands how the process works:

There are very few houses available at every bidding cycle based on our criteria overall and at the last bidding cycle there was only one house available that fit my criteria at my local authority (Fieldnotes diary, 29 August 2021).

Since it was five years since resettlement the family could move to an alternative local authority without having to lose the benefits of the VPRS. Nevertheless, Maryam and her family did not want to leave the local authority due to her children's school and her husband's work in the area. The limited properties available and her need for new housing not being at the top of the priority list meant that they still did not secure a new house and were still in a precarious condition due to ongoing harassment in their neighbourhood. Maryam could also not apply for a privately rented property independent of the social housing system due to the increased rent prices.

Alongside the level of precarity mentioned when exposed to harassment and violence, Aleena and Maryam's issues with housing highlight a second broader precarity both in their local authorities but also in the wider British society which I have already discussed in chapter five: the growing challenge for many to find affordable housing or gain access to social housing. In England alone, there were 1.2 million households on local authority waiting lists on the 31st of March 2022 (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, 2023).

Despite the increased need for social housing, during 2022, more than half of local authorities did not build a single house to tackle the issue with housing provision due to a lack of funding from central government and the restrictive measures in place that dictate how the construction of these new properties is financed (Bancroft, 2023). In addition, the current rent figures for Britain are at one of the highest levels they have been over the last decade, meaning that thousands of people are struggling to pay their rent and face the threat of homelessness (Mata, 2023). Consequently, this also means that households with lower incomes such as that of Maryam are even more dependent on social housing since the private rent market is unaffordable. As a solution, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has set up new rules which will give landlords greater freedoms to carry out property extensions, open up lofts and turn shops, takeaways and betting shops into living spaces (Daly, 2023).

Nevertheless, proposals come with the risk of creating homes out of spaces that do not meet the criteria for quality developments, adding to the pre-existing issue of unliveable housing conditions many living in social housing often endure. Such was the home of Aleena in 2021, after moving from the first home the VPRS allocated to her due to harassment and violence her and her family encountered from the neighbours: ‘Here we have rats in the house. They must move us to a better house’ (Interview #33, 7 May 2021). Even though Aleena and her family managed to escape the harassment and violence they were experiencing in their previous local authority, they are still in a precarious condition due to their housing conditions. Despite Middlesbrough providing a more welcoming experience for Aleena and her family, finding appropriate housing after leaving the safety net of the VPRS seems impossible.

A way forward might be for local authorities hosting refugee resettlement schemes to make sure that resettled families are feeling comfortable in the housing provided to them, having

welcoming neighbours being a high priority in their checklist. A way to eliminate harassment and violence from the host community is to strengthen the social cohesion between the resettled families and the host community. Jayakody et al (2022) provide a list of eight approaches they believe are suitable to strengthen social cohesion. A useful one in the case of the North East would be what they refer to as a ‘Built Environment’; spaces where ‘host and displaced communities [...] come together with different social status, culture, religion, and language backgrounds’ (p. 10). This approach was exemplified in the North East by the football Tuesdays described in chapter five where children from different backgrounds could come together in a shared hobby.

The approach also links well to a further suggestion made by Fatima for cultural exchanges in schools where resettled refugees study. As she said:

cultural exchanges would be very useful at schools ...school teachers should be better educated about the Arabic culture if a resettled child attends their school so that they are better equipped to support the children if they encounter incidents of violence and harassment’ (Interview #29, 19 October 2021).

Violence and harassment affect immensely refugees’ understanding of vulnerability and in particular, their experiences of vulnerability affecting integration which I discuss in more detail in chapter eight. For this reason, cultural exchanges are important to educate groups about diversity that will in turn, help children from resettlement backgrounds have a better experience of the school setting. This aligns with the suggestion of Mardiah et al (2024) that multicultural education needs to be urgently applied in schools to teach children about diversity and the cultural differences that are evident within communities. Similarly, Verkuten and Thijs (2013) and Le and Johansen (2011) emphasise how multicultural education can prevent youth violence, decrease prejudice and foster positive attitudes.

Learning English

When families are first resettled in the local authority, a priority is to help the family complete its papers to attend English lessons, so that '[they] can support [them]selves' (Fatima, Interview #29, 19 October 2021). Each local authority is responsible in setting up suitable English lessons in the area for the families if existing infrastructure is not already in place. From participants' experiences, it is suggested that most local authorities are successful in setting up English language lessons for the families. 'Trailblazers', Newcastle and Gateshead already had sufficient infrastructure organised by the local authorities where families were automatically registered to learn English. A structure mentioned often by participants was Gateshead College. This is a Further Education college which alongside ESOL classes which the participants were expected to take, also offers a range of A-level modules, Adult Professional Courses and University Level Courses amongst others.

Local authorities with limited or no experience in refugee provision were also successful in their majority with setting up sufficient English language lessons but their approach varied depending on the English language infrastructure they had in place prior to their participation in the VPRS. Durham County Council for example, has two main colleges, East Durham College and New Durham College, both offering ESOL classes in the county amongst other classes similar to those offered by Gateshead college. It is unclear from conversations with participants which college they were registered with to learn English as most were just referring to it as the 'college in Durham' ³⁰ not being able to identify exactly what its official name was. Participants did specify, though, that classes at the college they were attending in Durham were 'small', with a 'very good' and 'very friendly' teacher and the student body

³⁰ Reference not provided to keep participant's location anonymised.

consisted only of refugees who were resettled in County Durham at the same time via the VPRS³¹. Hartlepool Council had a similar setup with the family resettled there outlining how they were assigned English lessons with the ‘five other Syrian families’ who had arrived in the local authority via the scheme at the same time³². It is unclear from the conversation with participants who highlighted Gateshead College whether English lessons for resettled families in Gateshead College were set up strictly in groups with only individuals from the VPRS or whether it was mixed with other groups. Arguably, approaches across local authorities in this regard vary, depending on the local authority’s enactment of the scheme, the amount of funding they choose to dedicate to English language lessons and infrastructure already in place providing ESOL classes to other groups who settled within communities of the North East. Notably, these variations are not characteristic only of the application of the VPRS in the North East of England, as Chick and Hannagan-Lewis (2019) who conducted research of the VPRS in Wales, identified a similar ‘inconsistent patchwork of language education’ (p.12), which suggests that different approaches can be found across the UK regardless of the region.

Whilst grouping families who arrived in the local authority together to learn English is efficient if English level is the same across all resettled individuals, this becomes challenging for refugees who have a different level of English to the others and were not learning from the classes set up specifically for scheme refugees. Such a case was that of Maryam, who found the lessons ‘very easy for [her]’ (Interview #34, 2 June 2021) and was advised by her English language teacher to apply to more advanced classes at a programme independent from the classes offered specifically for the scheme. This underlines how governmental instructions on language provision given under the VPRS do not always meet the needs of

³¹ Reference not provided to keep participant’s location anonymised.

³² Reference not provided to keep participant’s location anonymised.

learners on the ground (Chick and Hannagan-Lewis, 2019). Maryam had learnt some English when she was in high school in Syria and the beginner classes offered by the VPRS were not helping her improve. Stating that ‘it is [her] dream to have good English’ (ibid), Maryam described how eventually she enrolled to even more advanced English lessons in Stockton College, a Further Education college offering English language certificates which is popular amongst refugees and immigrants in the region. This is how Maryam spoke of her experience learning English at Stockton college:

Stockton college is a very good ESOL centre. They are very helpful. And the level of their teaching is very good. Their staff is very good. This helped me improve my English. What also helped me was the people on the course who came from a different culture. It was very helpful. I spend my best time in the college. I recommend it to everybody. I tell my friends don't stay in the [host local authority's] course if you want to advance your English (Interview #34, 2 June 2021).

One of the friends Maryam made whilst a student at Stockton college was Wafa, who came to the UK as a migrant from a different Arabic speaking country to meet her husband who was working as a doctor here. She described how she didn't know a single word of English when she arrived, and she really struggled. Specifically, she said:

I was scared to go out of the house, go to the shops. I would usually go with my husband because he has been here for ages...he's a doctor (Interview #42, 11 June 2021).

That's when she decided to enrol at the ESOL course at Stockton College. Four years later she has now completed all the levels and is working on getting her Architecture degree from her home country recognised in the UK so that she can practice (ibid).

The conversation with Wafa communicated a sense of urgency to learn English as a newcomer in the UK which I also found with participants who arrived in the UK via the

VPRS. Mahmoud for example, who was resettled in one of the ‘completely fresh’ local authorities in 2019, mentioned that if ‘you have the language, everything is easy. You can do anything’ (Interview #35, 4 September 2021). Similarly, Fadi who was resettled in the same local authority as Mahmoud but in 2018, said that when you don’t speak English ‘everything is difficult. Confusing’ (Interview #37, 20 September 2021). He described how because of his limited English at the time, he had difficulties setting up the internet connection that he needed for his studies during the pandemic. He also struggled understanding local colloquialisms such as the phrase ‘hi, you alright?’, which as he emphasised, he now knows is just a way to greet people rather than asking and expecting an answer back (ibid). Finally, he highlighted his need to communicate adequately whether food is halal or identify from restaurants’ menus whether a dish from their list is halal since his reading in English was still limited (ibid). All these examples show how the ability to speak English is related to individuals’ sense of achievement and autonomy, both of which are important to refugees’ successful integration in the UK (Salvo and Williams, 2017).

Apart from learning English via the official route provided by the local authority or a college, participants outlined other ways they chose to learn English. Fadi (Interview #37, 20 September 2021) for example, enjoyed watching films in English, listening to how they pronounced words and writing them down. Similarly, Wafa would write everything she wanted to say in one long paragraph and memorise it (Interview #42, 11 June 2021). She also enjoyed reading in English and noting down words that she could use in the future herself (ibid).

Alternatively, others chose to attend English lessons organised by the VCS. One of the organisations from the VCS that participants highlighted a few times was the Comfrey

Project³³ and how it stepped in to help them learn English during the pandemic. Wajiha was resettled in one of the ‘trailblazer’ local authorities in 2019 just before the pandemic started. She underlined how vital the English lessons offered by Comfrey Project were during the lockdowns (Wajiha, Interview #39, 22 October 2021). The English language lessons offered by the local authority did not transition to online classes during lockdown and Wajiha and her family felt stranded in a country they did not speak the language (ibid). The Comfrey Project stepped in and provided classes on Zoom ‘support[ing] [her] to learn English during that time’ (ibid)). A similar experience was that of Maira and Fadi, who were resettled in the same ‘trailblazer’ local authority in 2020. They were one of the last families who arrived before the airports were shut down due to flight restrictions. They outline how ‘[they were] lucky and unlucky at the same time’ (Maira and Fadi, Interview #40, 22 October 2021). Lucky because they managed to enter the country before the lockdowns. Unlucky, because the lockdowns started two months after their arrival and didn’t even have a chance to start English language lessons through the local authority (ibid). The Comfrey Project gave them an opportunity to learn online. Even though learning online had its added challenges due to their digital illiteracy they managed to set everything up and attend lessons weekly (ibid).

Four different suggestions were made from participants regarding the language that could help the experience of both families currently resettled in the North East and for future schemes of resettlement. First, Hiba emphasised how a better assessment of English language is required at arrival (Interview #26, 16 September 2021). She mentioned how her and her family had a reasonable level of English in comparison to other families who had no English at all (ibid). The local authority thought that they had good English and would let them do things on their own (ibid). However, the family didn’t feel confident enough to use the

³³ The Comfrey Project was a very small, registered charity in Gateshead whose primary focus of work was refugees and asylum seekers.

English language in their everyday when they first arrived, found the North Eastern accent quite strong and struggled understanding and needed help booking appointments at the local dentist and the hospital amongst other places:

when we arrived, [the local authority] thought we had good English so they let us go alone to do things. Actually, we didn't ask, we wanted to learn. That's why. But it's hard for us if we don't know the system here. It's about things with the county council, the dentist, the hospital, the letters, the post. A better assessment of our English when we arrived could have helped (Hiba, Interview #36, 16 September 2021).

Better assessment of families' needs on the English language is important because even if they have English, using it on an everyday basis may still be a challenge for them.

Second, Mahmoud felt that progress in the English language should be monitored throughout the five years of the scheme and an assessment should take place regarding the level of services provided depending on the level of the English language progress (Interview #35, 4 September 2021). Mahmoud was in the UK for two years but because of Covid-19 was only learning English for one year:

the council now tells me that I have to do everything on my own. It's very bad. I am here two years but I am learning English only for one year. If I need to fix anything in my house, I need English. I can explain face to face but on the phone I can't. I need appointment for the GP. Now GPs are on the phone. I can't explain to them the problem with my shoulder. I need face to face. It's a problem. The council should have in mind my level of English when they tell me that I have to do everything on my own (Interview #35, 4 September 2021).

Because Mahmoud has been in the UK for two years now the help provided from the scheme as mentioned earlier was diminished significantly as there is an aim for families to do things on their own after the first two years of arrival. This has significantly impacted his ability to

go about his every day since he does not have enough English to help him to arrange house maintenance and book doctor's appointments on the phone. The reduction in services must be correlated to the families' ability to use the English language for a smoother integration.

Wajiha also suggested that local authorities enacting the VPRS should incorporate Arabic speaking staff within their teams for more efficient support:

if there is a place or office, where they can help us for support. For example, they have some staff who speak Arabic and English and that staff is always there, willing to help us support us, speak with us in Arabic. This is better than interpreter and wait for interpreter to come. If there are many people who talk English/Arabic and Arabic/English and they are there and provide support for us. Especially for me, if someone shows me and explains to me something that is new to me, I can get it. But if no one explains it to me I cannot understand (Interview #39, 22 October 2021).

Some local authorities do have interpreters affiliated with the local authority that are requested if needed but if it's something urgent, families cannot receive instant support and have to wait for the interpreter to arrive. In this case, suggestions like Wajiha's can go a long way, of increasing Arabic speaking staff within the resettlement teams or at targeted council positions often interacting with the families for a more efficient support.

Wajiha also underlined the importance of providing families with more intensive English language course across the North East on arrival so that they can learn the language faster (Interview #39, 22 October 2021). She highlighted how 'it's better to learn English quicker and in a short time so that I can find a job and work' (ibid). Whilst there are intense programmes of learning the English language across the region, the approaches vary and often refugees like Maryam discussed earlier, need to seek elsewhere the infrastructure they need to advance further. With refugee resettlement schemes embedded even more into the

government's strategies to contribute to global needs of resettlement related to forced migration, a more strategic and organised approach could be applied across regions. This will allow local authorities to exchange resources, share infrastructure and experiences of good practice. Whilst the exchange of good practice and of resources is attempted in the North East via the events organised by the North East Migration Partnership, there is no region-wide cooperation and coordination to ensure that good practices are applied.

To conclude, linguistic competence is very important in catalysing integration and refugees' overcoming of the vulnerability that arises post-resettlement when one is not able to communicate in the language of their host country. Nevertheless, whilst clearly recognising this, the VPRS has not always offered tailored solutions to refugee needs. This has been evident in the different levels of instruction across the region or in mitigating the loss of English language instruction due to the pandemic. This exemplifies how integration policies, including those of the VPRS, operate within restrictive timelines and conditions that do not always represent the needs of individuals.

Family reunification

Family reunification is a theme that came up in discussions with participants without being probed directly. The first participant who referred to family reunification was Wajiha. I initially asked Wajiha to outline her experience pre-resettlement. Through this conversation, Wajiha described the 'beautiful feeling' (Interview #39, 22 October 2021) she felt when herself and her family were resettled in the same local authority as her brother's family. A significant concern in existing literature is how family reunification affects participants' experience of resettlement. Ager and Strang (2008) for example, stress the importance of family reunification to societal integration. Alternatively, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2002), emphasise the stress and anxiety refugees can experience if they lose contact with close

relatives. Similarly, Choummanivong et al (2014) analyse how family reunification can affect health, wellbeing and resettlement outcomes, with reunification identified as the paramount obstacle to the successful resettlement of participants. Wajiha's case exemplifies how family reunification influenced her wellbeing.

Arguably, family reunification has also pre-determined not only Wajiha's experience of resettlement in the North East, which is automatically improved because of the positive feelings she has because of how close she is to her brother and his family but also determined her country of resettlement. Wajiha talked about her brother who came to the local authority through the same scheme but from Turkey whilst her and her family were hosted in Lebanon. She outlined the process:

I received a call from [UNHCR] ask[ing] me if I have any family in any of the [Arabic speaking] countries and they asked for the address. I told them I have family in Switzerland, Germany, and England. They said okay, we will take you to England and possibly you will be close to your brother. And actually this was right! My brother is just 20 minutes walking from my house! (Interview #39, 22 October 2021).

According to the UNCHR (2023) family reunification is a 'universal right' widely recognized as a vital issue for individuals from refugee backgrounds and is broadly understood as the bringing together of a family that has been set apart for several reasons throughout their resettlement process (Rousseau et al, 2004). For someone to be eligible for family reunification, the instigator of family reunification needs to be officially recognized as a refugee and the family members should also be considered 'persons of concern' to the UNCHR (2023). UNHCR (2023) also emphasizes:

in contrast to all other third-country solutions such as resettlement, education and labour, states have a legal responsibility to put in place legal frameworks that enable family

reunification. Family reunification is a state-managed procedure existing under the national legal framework of a country. The reunification of refugee families is first and foremost the responsibility of states. UNHCR monitors state compliance with refugee family reunification obligations and continuously advocates with states for the adoption of flexible, protection-focused procedures in line with the limitation of their refugee situation.

In the UK, only spouses, parents of minor children and dependent children are considered eligible members for family reunification (UNHCR, 2023). Even though Wajiha and her brother were both officially recognized refugees, Wajiha's brother for example, could not apply for a reunification with Wajiha, as she is an adult sibling. In this case, Wajiha and her family were resettled to the UK due to their own vulnerabilities, separate from the reasons that considered her brother and his family as 'vulnerable' enough to resettle via the VPRS. Wajiha and her brother did not need to go through an official reunification process as outlined by the British government. Official reunification routes decided by states can be complicated with 'several practical, legal, and financial barriers' (UNCHR, 2023).

Iqra and her husband Aziz are exemplary of the challenges of reunification. Iqra and Aziz are an older couple who were resettled in one of the 'trailblazing' local authorities in 2017.

Initially, they left Syria for Kurdistan with two of their three adult children. When the war started, their middle child, who was in his 20s, decided to go to Sweden because they have relatives there. They specified that 'he didn't go as a refugee. He went as a traveller...' (Iqra and Aziz, Interview #38, 19 November 2021). The other two children stayed with their parents. One of them is married. They then fled to Kurdistan altogether. When they arrived in Kurdistan their youngest child moved on, first to Germany and then to Sweden, to join his brother. Their oldest, already married with one child decided to stay in Kurdistan until his wife got a scholarship at a German university to pursue further studies with the promise that Aziz and Iqra would join them a year after, once they settled in. After a year, 'because [they]

were refugees in Kurdistan, UNHCR messaged that all the Syrian people can come to the UK with this scheme' (ibid). They applied and then the UNHCR sent them an appointment for interview. They did the interview, and it was successful. Eleven months later they came to the North East. When I asked if their children are allowed to visit them in the UK they said:

They cannot visit us. Our son and his wife are in Germany. After three years they applied for asylum. Now they cannot visit us until they get the nationality (ibid).

According to the UNHCR (2023), challenges families often face ahead of reunification are related to language, finances, accessing legal documents such as passports and long waiting times amongst others. Judging from Iqra and Aziz's story, their reunification with their children is affected by long waiting times within the immigration processes potentially both from the UK and Germany, as well as a lack of passport and other evidence that may be required by the UK government both for travelling legally into the country but also to prove their relationship.

Iqra and Aziz felt that the UK's reunification immigration laws should have been better communicated to them (Interview #38, 19 November 2021). Halima highlighted the 'phenomenon' as she called it, of family reunification and the issues families have been facing trying to bring one of their family members to the UK after they have been resettled themselves: 'even though families often meet all the criteria of the reunion legislation the process is very slow' (Interview #30, 20 September 2021) she highlighted. Halima emphasised that it is important that the process is better communicated to families who attempt this process so that they know what to expect (ibid).

To reiterate the relevance of family reunification to the experience of VPRS, it appears that if some of the participants knew what the scheme entailed in terms of reunification they might have opted for a different scheme. On the other hand, in cases where family was settled in the

UK, the VPRS appears to have been applied in a way that enables the reunification of families in a broader sense than the scheme stipulates. The deciding factor seems to be that the VPRS is a national scheme rather than an inter-state one, as EU resettlement policy is, for example. Thus, one repercussion of implementing the VPRS instead of EU-wide resettlement is that it restricts the ability of people to settle near family and friends, which would ease their integration.

The final phases of the scheme

Despite these challenges with aspects of the scheme, it is notable that satisfaction with the scheme was high with participants, particularly in their first two years in the UK. Having an overall perspective on the scheme was instructive about how participants experience different aspects of the scheme with hindsight, weighing good and bad experiences, comparing to others, and finally exiting the scheme.

Participants would often state that their local authority provided adequate support and provision for a ‘basic life’ (Mahmoud, Interview #35, 4 September 2021) and that the local authority ‘[couldn’t] do more’ (Hiba, Interview #36, 16 September 2021) in that regard. This was a consistent view across most categories of local authorities participating in the VPRS I have identified in chapter 5. For example, when families first arrived, they found all the basics necessary in their new home. Participants also reported approvingly that local authorities taught them how to carry out simple, everyday tasks such as paying taxes, using the post office, and travelling by public transport and about ‘life in the UK’ in general, on which they had to attend lessons in their first month of arrival. Some participants even requested this thesis passes on their gratitude to the local authorities who helped them start a new life in the UK (Hiba, Interview #36, 16 September 2021; Maryam, Interview #35, 4

September 2021; Iqra and Aziz, Interview #38, 19 November 2021; Omar, Interview #31, 21 September 2021)³⁴.

Whilst overall, comments were positive, some participants compared their experience with other families who came to the UK at the same time as them but were resettled in other local authorities, some outside of the North East. Asma for example, outlined how other families she knew went to different cities and ‘their councils would offer them more help (Interview #32, 27 May 2021). [They] didn’t get the same treatment’ (ibid). When asked what were the main differences that she felt were important she said:

rent for example. When we first came here, we had to pay rent ourselves whereas my husband and I didn’t work. The area was also not suitable for us to live in. We experienced a lot of racism when we were there. And the council didn’t take us seriously when we told them that we are not comfortable in the area. So, we had to move by ourselves. We just moved to a new area, and we started a new life, and it is much better now (ibid).

Asma also highlighted that those other families had better English than her and her family even though they all had limited English when they first arrived. Those families were resettled to local authorities near Manchester, County Durham, Darlington, and Hartlepool. ‘Their councils are very good’(ibid) , she emphasised, ‘and focused on them until they knew how to read and write in English’ (ibid). Notably, Asma and her family are another case of refugees resettled in the North East via the VPRS who opted to move to Middlesbrough because they weren’t comfortable living in the area they were resettled in.

Participants also emphasised how after they completed their first and second years of the VPRS, support diminished significantly. As mentioned earlier, after families learn English,

³⁴ This came from participants who were resettled in local authorities with both high and low levels of infrastructure.

they are expected to do everything themselves without the support of the council. This is a shared aim between all local authorities regardless of their experience with dispersal and resettlement and the infrastructure they have available. Mahmoud for example, described how '[he] goes to other people for help now because the council tells [him] that [he has] to do everything on [his] own' (Interview #35, 4 September 2021). At the time of the interview Mahmoud had completed two years of the scheme. Maryam has a similar experience in a different local authority. She highlights that the local authority helped them in their first months in the UK but now 'if [she] tries to contact them they say that [the family has] to try to do everything by [them]selves' (Interview #34, 2 June 2021). Her friend Zainab, an Arabic speaking activist in the region, helps them a lot. Maryam also opts for google advice when she needs to solve a problem (ibid).

Whilst support diminishes after the first couple of years, there are participants who highlighted that the local authority still supports them now that they applied for their Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR). Hiba, for example said that when her and her family completed their five years of the VPRS they were eligible to apply for ILR (Interview #36, 16 September 2021). However, once they applied all the support they were receiving from the government, such as Universal Credit stopped (ibid). The local authority alongside local charities, stepped in and helped them complete forms and provided them with basic supplies where needed. The wait she highlighted, for ILR can be long, '6-10 months', but she was hopeful that they would get it sooner than that (ibid). According to the UK Visas and Immigration (2024a), 'there is no standard processing time, but you'll usually be told whether your application has been successful within 6 months'. The process may take longer if the individual case is considered 'complex'. This may be because there is a need for an interview, support documents must be verified, or because of personal circumstances, where they list 'criminal conviction' as an example.

In conclusion, refugees' experience of the VPRS suggests that the enactment of scheme is enough to pull individuals out of a condition of 'bare life' (Agamben, 1995) which often defines the conditions that refugees and asylum seekers live in, but it does not extend to a good and political life that allows one to flourish either. This is because, as the comments about exiting the scheme remind us, the VPRS and the support that comes with it are temporary and should be considered as a transitional scheme, where people move through it onto a new status. Therefore, schemes like the VPRS can be seen as offering ways to address vulnerabilities on the way to citizenship. In the chapters that follow I look more closely at the connections between vulnerability and neoliberalism that the scheme forges on the way to citizenship.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the experiences of 13 families resettled in the North East of England via the VPRS. It discussed the importance of listening to these lived experiences. In doing so, it unravelled families' feelings from arrival, their experiences of housing provision, learning English and family reunification.

Drawing from these themes, refugees' experience of resettlement suggests that the enactment of VPRS improves individuals' lives beyond the 'bare life' mode that Agamben (1995) discusses, but this is also a life where they do not flourish and they do not participate in politics. This is because, whilst the VPRS provides refugees with the necessities to begin a life in the UK at an 'adequate enough' standard, local authority support diminishes after one or two years and eventually in most cases, completely withdrawn five years after resettlement, with the expectation that refugees should do things on their own after that. This shows the impact of austerity, hostility and limited solidarity to refugee resettlement discussed in the earlier chapters and reinstates how vulnerability is used as a resource that

allows refugees to relocate but value is extracted from their lives for local authorities and VCS to access valuable funding that will help with their austerity-stricken communities. As I have already mentioned, austerity policies were designed in such a way that they targeted the most ‘vulnerable’ and marginal groups in society, hitting them harder than any other income group. An ‘exception’ was made to this with the introduction of the VPRS that aimed to ameliorate the ‘vulnerabilities’ that deemed refugees eligible for resettlement and the assumed vulnerabilities that follow initial arrival, but after that, refugees, as everyone in post-austerity British society, are expected to become independent. Nevertheless, as refugees’ lived experience of VPRS has shown, for some this independence comes at the cost of a successful integration, as language barriers and assumptions on individuals’ vulnerabilities prevent refugees from living the best life they can in the North East. This is exacerbated by the embedded migrant hostility in UK policies, that complicate refugees’ ability to integrate successfully in British society post-resettlement. This also exemplifies how solidarity in the UK is limited and, in many cases, abstract and based on weak normative commitments shaped by austerity and hostility in the country. In following chapters I explore these themes further. In chapter eight I examine the varied understandings of vulnerability expressed by the local authorities, the VCS and resettled refugees I have discussed in Part II of this thesis and how these understandings shape refugee resettlement and integration.

PART III Interpreting the Concept of Vulnerability

Chapter 8-Actors' Interpretations of the Concept of Vulnerability

Introduction

In Part II I introduced the three actors situated in the North East of England and discussed their roles within the region in relation to the VPRS: local government, VCS, and resettled refugees. In this chapter I draw from the ways these actors reflected on the term of vulnerability during interviews, to address my third research question of this thesis: how is the concept of vulnerability interpreted by the actors that constitute the VPRS in the North East of England? Through these interpretations I deepen the discussion in previous chapters on the use of 'vulnerability' in the practice of refugee resettlement and in turn, the interwoven understandings of vulnerability that emerge. My interviews with each actor reveal three main layers of vulnerability. The first of these centres around the vulnerabilities that rendered refugees eligible for resettlement to the UK as per the UNHCR 'vulnerability' criteria that local authorities applied in dispensing services to them. The second concerns the vulnerabilities refugees faced in their host countries pre-resettlement which were added onto those primary 'vulnerabilities', creating additional needs in resettlement. And the third is about the vulnerabilities refugees face post-resettlement as they integrate in the North East of England, which are oftentimes quite different to the 'vulnerabilities' that elicited their inclusion in the VPRS in the first place. I refer to this last understanding as integration-oriented vulnerabilities. These three forms of vulnerability have different registers and implications. They are registered as indications of refugeehood by international bodies and national authorities in the first instance, national and local authorities in the second, but are often ignored in the third. This means that although VPRS addresses primary protection

needs, it establishes refugees in a trajectory where exclusion often accompanies the experience of resettlement.

Local authority understandings of vulnerability

Reflecting on vulnerability was a complex process for representatives of local authorities, due to their conflicting understandings of the term. First, there is a generalised understanding of vulnerability which embraces the ‘vulnerability’ criteria set out by UNHCR that as officers enacting the VPRS had to consider in their everyday operations of the scheme. Notably, the policies framework for the VPRS is set by the UK government, whilst the UNHCR manages the refugee selection for resettlement overseas. Nevertheless, different variations of these criteria have been at the forefront of international refugee protection in the context of the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ and particularly resettlement not just in the UK but for many nation states of the European Union (Böhm et al, 2021). For individuals to be resettled via the VPRS, UNHCR first needs to identify ‘vulnerable’ individuals through its several vulnerability assessment frameworks (UNHCR, 2017; UNHCR, 2018a; UNHCR, 2018b; UNHCR, 2018c). Welfare, coping strategies, dependency, basic needs, education, food security, health, shelter and WASH services (showering water, drinking water, waste disposal etc.) are the common vulnerability indicators that help the UNHCR across the five host countries to measure the ‘vulnerability’ of refugees in need of resettlement. As such, individuals deemed suitable to be resettled as per the UNHCR’s global ‘vulnerability’ criteria need to qualify under at least one of the following descriptors:

- People in need of legal and physical protection
- Survivors of torture or violence
- People with medical needs

- Women and girls at risk
- People who want to reunite with their family
- Children and adolescents at risk
- People with a lack of foreseeable alternative durable solutions

Once the UNHCR identifies the ‘vulnerable’ individuals, it refers them to the Resettlement Operation in UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI), based in the Home Office (UNHCR, 2018a). At this point responsibility shifts from UNHCR to the UK government. UKVI then decides on the suitability of the referred refugee: whether the VPRS can ‘meet the resettlement needs of the applicant and their dependants’ (UNHCR, 2018a, p.7); if ‘the resettlement of the applicant and their dependants in the UK would not be conducive to the public good’ (ibid); and if ‘resettlement in the UK would be contrary to the best interests of the applicant, or their dependants’ (ibid). This shift of responsibility suggests that the UK applies a second filter to the definition of vulnerability. For example, the phrase ‘best interests of the applicant’ underlines the possibility that resettlement could exacerbate existing vulnerabilities rather than alleviate them but leaves open the question of how this is assessed, i.e. who interprets ‘best interests’. Alternatively, the phrase ‘not be conducive to the public good’ implies that vulnerabilities of the host communities are measured against the ‘vulnerabilities’ of the UN policy. Here again, an interpretation of ‘public good’ and who constitutes ‘the public’ is at play, while also being vague.

Once selected refugees arrive in the UK, it is the local authority’s responsibility to enact the resettlement policies and facilitate integration. This is a typical process found in practices of resettlement in many destination countries (Sandvik, 2011; Schneider, 2021). In this instance, integration is focused on two levels of vulnerability. The first level is more personal and uses pre-established vulnerabilities identified by the UNHCR’s global ‘vulnerability’ criteria,

which officers enacting the VPRS at the local level must have in mind when supporting the resettled families. The second level is more general and includes pre-assumed vulnerabilities such as the lack of English language skills which may be hindering a fast integration post-resettlement. Strategies for tackling what are assumed vulnerabilities after resettlement such as the lack of English language are developed within the policies that enact the VPRS at the national level, whilst any remedies to vulnerabilities that pre-existed the resettlement process are tackled by different officers who may be working specifically for the scheme but may also be based within a different team and work in collaboration with the VPRS officers.

A common department for local authorities that had their team members collaborate with the scheme officers was Housing. Housing officers already had some experience working with ‘vulnerable’ groups of non-refugee background and therefore were trained appropriately and were able both to dive straight into the work for the scheme but also to consult and support with the processes.

Nevertheless, the integration strategies introduced by the government to alleviate the vulnerabilities that refugees might face before resettlement as well as the integration-oriented vulnerabilities refugees might experience following resettlement, encourage generalised understandings of vulnerability that reflect the UNHCR ‘vulnerability’ criteria that do not capture the full spectrum of vulnerability. Consider two excerpts from conversations with Claire, leading officer for VPRS at Gateshead Council and Lucy, leading officer of the VPRS at Durham County Council highlighting this:

To me, there's two different levels to vulnerability. [Families] need to have a vulnerability within the criteria set by UNHCR. And that's quite prescribed. It's people who've got medical needs, and need legal or physical protection, survivors of violence and torture. If you go on the UNHCR website, it tells you what the criteria for vulnerability are, under this scheme.

And those criteria are recognised and accepted. But then there's an understanding of vulnerability that makes me think about walking in someone else's shoes. What makes them vulnerable. There are different levels of vulnerability, and you must not apply your assumptions to individuals. It's about recognising that one person's experience will be different to another's. So for me, vulnerability is about recognising that they've had some really tough things that thankfully, I will never have to contend with. But it's sort of also recognising that their experiences are different. And therefore, we need to plan our services around those (Lucy and Tom, Interview #22, 30 September 2021).

This excerpt shows how there are two levels to vulnerability. First, is the prescribed level of 'vulnerability' used within international policy and the UNHCR which states also inherit through schemes of resettlement such as the VPRS and that local government must comply with to enact the VPRS in their region. Second, is the vulnerability shaped by people's individual needs (and connected to our inherent vulnerability as humans), which is revealed when people work on the ground with the refugees who arrive through the VPRS. The following extract exemplifies how assumptions made about the connection between prescribed and individual needs based on vulnerability can be misleading:

I think [vulnerability] can be quite generalised if we look at what the UNHCR tell us and the tick of boxes. The fact that people have been exposed to all these issues in their own country. So, if you look at those boxes, they are in a vulnerable situation because they've lost all of that. But we've learned not to underestimate [people]. When people come, we have a team meeting, and we bring all their information, and we go and we take them out to the staff. For example, one lady was from Sudan. She was raped by 12 soldiers. And she hadn't had a home for 12 years. And her boys had been displaced for 12 years. We were really worried about her and we were making presumptions about her mental health and her ability to cope. We planned to give her support worker some extra support to help the lady cope. But the lady is

integrating really well. Her boys are in school, she's made friends. She's doing well. So I think it's a very personal thing, vulnerability, that goes beyond the UNHCR criteria. We need to consider the criteria of course, but we also need to get to know the person and the family. And then look at the actual issues they are facing (Claire, Interview #23, 14 October 2021)).

These two extracts suggest that particular kinds of ‘remedies’ are offered to refugees once resettled, based on the UNHCR criteria for ‘vulnerability’ that allowed them to resettle to the North East of England in the first place. Whilst this was not explicitly stated in conversations with participants representing local authorities, I would take this suggestion a step further and argue that alongside the responses offered to refugees based on the UNCHR criteria for ‘vulnerability’, are also strategies to tackle the integration-oriented vulnerabilities assumed that refugees would have post-resettlement, a main example being a lack of the English language. Faced with the realisation that those responses or integration strategies are not needed or are not as relevant as assumed, different kinds of responses are offered after an assessment that would target the real needs refugees may have post resettlement. These would often be needs separate to those identified through the UNHCR criteria. This is exemplified by the case of the woman from Sudan discussed above, who may have been offered certain services regarding her mental health based on the UNHCR ‘vulnerability’ criteria. Once officers realised that those services were not needed, a team was tasked with deciding what other services could be provided to her. Another example not evident in the extract but discussed in chapter seven, is that of local authorities automatically signing individuals upon arrival to English language lessons without necessarily assessing their levels of ability. Whilst most individuals indeed had no English language skills at all, there were some cases where some English was identified. For these cases, it was either assumed that English was no longer an issue and were thus released from the obligation of English language lessons whereas participants felt that support was still required, or individuals were

placed in classes with others who had no English at all, meaning that they were not learning anything new and had to seek more advanced English language lessons elsewhere upon recommendations of their assigned English teachers. This exemplifies how assessments of vulnerability and need had to be reconsidered in practice and updated regularly to ensure they kept meeting individuals' needs.

Claire and Lucy's approach to vulnerability assessment shows how at the local level practice can go beyond the neoliberal assumption in which central government practice is rooted. Within the neoliberal narrative, '[v]ulnerabilities are [...] understood in terms of the barriers or limits to becoming a resilient subject' (Chandler, 2016, p.15), with resilience being deeply rooted in an individual's capacity to adapt to change (ibid). In line with this understanding, part of the VPRS policy dictates that after one or two years, support should diminish significantly, and families are expected to do everything on their own. This was also confirmed in conversations with refugees themselves who highlighted how independence was key to their integration, which justified the scheme eventually withdrawing support, despite individuals having problems with integration. This suggests that at the national level, the UK government expects support to be provided with regards to refugees' vulnerabilities based on the UNCHR 'vulnerability' criteria or the assumed integration-oriented vulnerabilities in post-resettlement which once ameliorated, should render further assistance at the local level obsolete. Whilst practiced to some extent, Claire and Lucy's willingness to probe beyond these two levels of vulnerability exemplifies the flexibility central government has allowed with funding in the enactment of the VPRS, which as I showed in chapter five allows local government to use resources as they see fit as long as they mobilise discretion.

If central government did not apply this flexibility, support provided to the woman from Sudan would have been withdrawn with no alternative services planned for her. This is because she indicated substantial 'adaptive capacity' (ibid) related to the 'vulnerabilities' that

were UNHCR recognised and allowed her to resettle in the UK. Nevertheless, Claire and her team due to this flexibility used the timeframe allowed by the central government to tend to other needs she had, which could help with any vulnerabilities that appeared post-resettlement.

Moreover, in their quotes both Claire and Lucy exemplify the political dynamics at stake in the various definitions of vulnerability that contest each other which I have already identified in my discussion of vulnerability and international policy in chapter three. There is a distinction between a formal and regularised framing of vulnerability versus a more lived experience and less deterministic sense of vulnerability. In chapter three I indicated that refugee resettlement policy navigates between a formal and an informal sphere (Sandvik, 2011). The formal sphere represents the refugee resettlement framework as dictated by UNHCR's Resettlement Handbook, whilst the informal sphere represents the reality of UNHCR officers applying the formal instructions in practice, at the local level and the informal processes that would be used to diverge from the formal processes. I explained how the vulnerability assessment frameworks initiated by the UNHCR offices in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, to measure the 'vulnerability' of Syrian refugees who sought protection in these countries after fleeing Syria, exemplify not only an attempt of regularisation at the local level pre-resettlement, but also the contestations made to the use and practice of 'vulnerability' between the formal and informal spheres of international policy.

A contestation can also be found at the local level with Claire and Lucy's teams. While having in mind the more formal and regularised understanding of vulnerability set out by the UNHCR's criteria on 'vulnerability', they can contest that understanding based on the experiences they gain working with vulnerability directly. In this case, vulnerability stops being a 'tick of boxes' and transitions to 'a very personal thing' that is shaped by 'experiences that are different'.

It is important to note that this contestation is not an attempt to regularise the use and measure vulnerability as it is done by UNHCR offices in host countries pre-resettlement but to allow the informal aspect of it to be more considerate and flexible to the needs of the individuals resettled in their remit. This vulnerability requires an adaptation of local authority provision to be able to help with the actual issues families are facing and not the ones assumed that someone with a 'vulnerability', as per the UNHCR criteria, should have arriving in the North East.

This adaptation in local authority understanding of vulnerability is related to participants' work with refugees. Puvimanasinghe et al (2015) in a study exploring the experiences of settlement workers caring for refugees and asylum seekers in South Australia, outline amongst other recurring themes, how by working with people 'from diverse ethnic, language, and religious backgrounds; age and education levels; pre-migratory histories; family disruptions; and resettlement experiences' (p.751), has allowed service providers to gain cultural awareness and get into a practice of adaptation. The awareness and adaptation observed by Puvimanasinghe et al (2015) in South Australia can also be identified in the enactment of the VPRS by local authorities in the North East of England. Lindsay, a Senior Support Worker at Durham County Council, noted the relevance of cultural awareness in the understanding and application of vulnerability (Interview #27, 21 October 2021).

Specifically, she mentioned that 'feedback from the family is very important' and that she and her team 'make an active effort to learn' from the families resettled in their remit (ibid).

Following on from these comments, I asked her whether she did any training on cultural awareness or vulnerability or whether this came with experience, and she responded:

A little bit of both. When we started the [scheme], our experience working with other cultures was quite limited. Most of our team came from a housing background, so we had worked with people from different minorities [...] but none of us had ever worked so closely with families

from different cultures. So we trailed the [trailblazers] for a while and then over the years we've just kind of learned [...] by working with the different families, as well as regular training (ibid).

Arguably, the awareness and adaptation observed in the practice of local authorities in the North East expands beyond ethnicity, language, religion, education to also include vulnerability. In this instance, the local authorities' client caseloads regarding 'vulnerability' keeps changing because of new arrivals and this variability requires a frequent updating of their knowledge and adaptation of their services to reach the needs of their clients. This was something exemplified in both Claire and Lucy's accounts. Additionally, there is a correlation between experience in running the scheme and local authorities interacting with the resettled families. The more local authorities listened, the more understanding they gained on vulnerability, meaning that the more experience local authorities gained on the running of the scheme, the more in tune with the families' needs local authorities became.

As a result, the closer the role participants had with the families the more reflective they were of their understandings of vulnerability. I found support workers to be the most in-tune with a more personalised understanding of vulnerability because of the longer hours they were in contact with the families. Salwa, a Support Worker for North Tyneside Council for example, highlighted that:

vulnerability, is a very big word. [...] It means a lot and is [a] very personal feeling for each individual'. '[...] any one of us can be vulnerable [...] according to the situation (Interview #26, 10 May 2021).

Situations can change leading to different vulnerabilities each time. Salwa outlined how the different situations the family she supports are in, lead them to different vulnerabilities (ibid). First, families faced torture in Syria: '[...] vulnerability then was torture'. Families then 'fled

their country, their house'. 'They are free of torture'. But finding freedom from torture means that they 'they lost everything. They were alone', 'with nowhere to go'. Then families sought refuge in Lebanon or Jordan but 'they had a lot of bad experiences with the people there'. It is important to here note that Salwa previously also worked with an organisation of the VCS in Newcastle. This enhanced her awareness around vulnerability and what it requires:

Training is important. Actually, I have been employed a day before the first families arrived. Just a day! [laughs]. But fortunately, I was working as a volunteer for the North East's refugee services for nine months. So I had experience with the process. With the Home Office, with housing, with benefits. With the nature of the people who arrive in the country. How to build the trust. How to be patient. Patience is very important. Patience, confidentiality with any person I work with. Being patient. Understanding their needs as we said. As each family. As each individual. Because each one is different. It's very important. And to deal with them with impartiality, also (Salwa, Interview #26, 10 May 2021).

In instances where participants lacked a frontline worker's experience of vulnerability, keeping in tune with families' needs was more complicated but arguably, an equally necessary step in advocating appropriately for people's needs. Ryan for example, was a Councillor for Durham County Council for 15 years, who recently became involved with equality and inclusion. His portfolio includes a variety of projects, with a significant portion of those focusing on homelessness and humanitarian issues such as that of Syria and Afghanistan and the resettlement of refugees in the region. When I asked him how he understands the concept of vulnerability he said:

If we concentrate on the refugee status, by definition, [people] are classified as vulnerable. They've left their homeland, they've left their place, and they've come into a completely new country with not a lot of support. And that's where the government provides financial support.

And it's down to local authorities [...] to support these families (Interview #21, 11 November 2021).

Ryan's understanding of vulnerability through this definition echoes the UNHCR's global resettlement criteria and the notion of pre-resettlement vulnerabilities discussed earlier. This is common for people working in higher level positions as they lack the necessary in-person experience to define vulnerability based on people's lived experiences. This is exemplified further by David, a Councillor for a Gateshead Council since 2014, where he was responsible for a ward, which as he highlighted 'has the most diverse population', further underlining that 'there are parts of [the local authority] which are not ethnically diverse at all, but mine is' (Interview #20, 4 November 2021). He later became a Cabinet member in 2018 where his remit furthered into economic development and housing. It is through his remit on housing that '[he] became more knowledgeable about the things [I am] discussing' and was therefore confident in discussing with me about the VPRS (ibid). I asked him how he understands the concept of vulnerability:

I don't think I'm gonna help you very much. I suppose what I'll say is that when the Afghan scheme started, and when they talked about it, it was made very clear that these were people who were professionals. I think a lot of them were interpreters. So they were expected to have good English, good levels of English language ability. So I suppose in that way, they weren't vulnerable. They were professional, English speaking people who would come in and settle down (ibid).

David's account suggests an understanding of vulnerability rooted in the integration-oriented stereotypes of vulnerability post-resettlement that illustrate refugees as unskilled, with limited or no English ability, as well no adequate professional qualifications (Green, 2005; Kaya, 2016; Lundborg and Skedinger, 2016). This can be misleading and detrimental to the

application of the scheme as Councillors play a crucial role in framing the welcoming and integration of refugees in the local community. If Councillors do not have a good understanding of the issues, they have responsibility for from the ground, their decisions will not be properly informed. In the specific case, the Councillor's words also highlight how narrowly vulnerability was defined by policymakers in the Afghan Resettlement Scheme at the time and how exclusionary it was of other groups of people who may also have been professionals but lacked the English language skills necessary to qualify for resettlement.

Ryan highlighted the importance of:

[getting] down and dirty into the trenches to learn what the true issues are. If you hear from senior people, it's their understanding, which may be misplaced... If you don't have the right message, how can you take informed decisions, to engage with those people at the grassroots level? Those people are in the trenches and its through them that I get to know an awful lot more detail than perhaps I would have otherwise not known about (Interview #21, 11 November 2021).

It is important to note here the war metaphor Ryan uses to describe the significance frontline work makes to the understanding of vulnerability. This is further underscored when Ryan outlined his first attempts in 'getting down and dirty into the trenches'. This suggests that understanding vulnerability is difficult work that requires time-consuming personal involvement that should not be taking for granted the understandings given by the central government. As already mentioned, one of Ryan's projects focuses on homelessness. He described how at the time of our conversation he attended a governmental webinar, where a Midlands based MP challenged all the participants to take an active and personal interest in five homelessness cases (ibid). He is hoping that with these five cases he will be able to gain a more first-hand understanding of homelessness in the region to advocate better for the

people he is advocating for (ibid). This is an important practice that if enacted by all Councillors involved with decisions when working with ‘vulnerable’ groups of people would allow them to make more informed decisions within their roles.

To conclude, local authority understandings of vulnerability can vary but it was clear from most of them that frontline work makes a difference in these understandings. Most participants had a good understanding of vulnerability and were in fact able to distinguish between the formalistic aspect of UNHCR’s application of the term as a criterion of resettlement and later the actual needs refugees may have once resettled in their local authority. Councillors’ understandings reflected a more formal understanding of vulnerability which did not reflect the lived experience from the ground. Nevertheless, Councillors like Ryan expressed a motivation to gain that experience to advocate better for the individuals the policies target, which exemplifies how frontline work is perceived in the sector as a relevant factor or skill in delivering the work required.

This suggests that understandings of vulnerability are shaped by institutional position and authority. This has two implications for the concept of vulnerability. Firstly, it reinforces that individuals’ lived experience of vulnerability may often be overlooked as it does not fit into the formalised understandings set by international policy. Second, such understandings can reinforce stereotypes of refugees, feeding, in the UK’s case, into the wider discourse of hostility towards immigration.

VCS understandings of vulnerability

Most participants representing the VCS found it difficult to pin down an exact understanding of vulnerability highlighting how the closer one works on the ground, the more nuanced and complex the understandings of vulnerability are. ‘It’s a spectrum [...] with a huge range’

(Interview #3, 27 October 2020), Fran from Darlington Assistance for Refugees (DAR) described. Similarly, Mohamed from North of England Refugee Service (NERS) emphasized that ‘working in the sector, I don’t think anyone knows what vulnerability is’ (Interview #13, 28 October 2020). In comparison to local authorities, the VCS seemed to lack the automatic reaction of referring to the UNHCR ‘vulnerability’ criteria. Their understanding seemed more open but also more nebulous in nature. Nevertheless, from my conversations with participants of the VCS two main themes kept appearing, articulated as ‘underlining issues’ (ibid) after arrival in the North East that could fall under the spectrum of vulnerability.

The first type of underlining issues that could fall under the spectrum of vulnerability are related to mental health. Mohamed for example said:

if someone comes into our office and needs help renewing their medical form, then we sit down with them. But then we realise that there [are] all these underlining issues that they are experiencing in addition to the help they initially seek from us. We had a lady who came and was complaining about her neighbours and noise, but we finally found out she was having mental health issues, and nobody wanted to know about it (ibid).

Mohamed then described further that there is this general perception that if you are a refugee or an asylum seeker then you already have mental health issues, because you had to flee conflict (ibid). In this instance, mental health is another example of the integration-oriented vulnerabilities assumed at the post-resettlement phase mentioned earlier.

Indeed, there is a great chance that someone who has gone through conflict and torture will be suffering with their mental health. Research indicates that there is a high-risk of mental health challenges amongst refugees resettled in destination countries of the Global North due to the conflict, displacement, and violence they experienced pre-resettlement. Tinghög et al’s (2017) study for example, shows that Syrian refugees resettled in Sweden between 2011 and

2013 suffered with high levels of depression (40.2%), low subjective well being (37.7%), anxiety (31.8%) and post-traumatic stress disorder (29.9%). In a later study, Mangrio et al (2022) show that almost 50% of newly arrived refugees in Sweden are at risk for mental illness due to a pre-migration exposure to violence. Moreover, Nesterko et al (2020) outline how mental health-related challenges of newly resettled refugees in Germany are related to lack of information about family members and concerns around family reunification. Similar observations to the above are made by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2017) for migrants in the UK and particularly ‘groups of vulnerable migrants’ which the UK recognises as: ‘asylum seekers and refugees’, ‘unaccompanied children’, ‘undocumented migrants’, ‘low paid migrant workers and ‘people who have been trafficked’ (ibid). Repeating the information offered by the World Health Organisation, the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2017) underscores how one in five individuals who experience conflict will experience a mental health disorder, whilst one in 11 cases will be moderate or severe.

Nevertheless, it’s also important to be cautious in the assumptions that service providers make about individuals with a background in forced displacement because assuming mental health issues can lead to further vulnerabilities. This is exemplified from Fran’s understanding of vulnerability. She emphasized that one of the crucial aspects of providing services to refugees and asylum seekers is:

to not increase vulnerability by making people dependent on us and also we don't want to increase their vulnerability by making them feel as if it's us just giving to them the whole time. That's quite degrading in a sense and it undermines their self-esteem and makes them even more vulnerable (Interview #3, 27 October 2020).

Fran further highlighted that dealing with the vulnerability of mental health is something they are always still learning on how to deal with (ibid). ‘We are making so many mistakes’ (ibid),

she emphasized. One of the reasons why individuals like Fran find it challenging to recognise mental health issues swiftly are the cultural differences prominent between VCS workers and resettled refugees. She explained how gardening helps bridge those barriers:

[Cultural differences] are a real concern. We try to go around it. We have one of our members who's got an allotment and she's managed to get some of the refugees and asylum seekers onto her allotment helping her growing things. [...] We do have some asylum seekers who got allotments and some of them are absolutely amazing at growing things. I think they're growing vines outside! One of them has even given us a vine [laughs] (ibid).

Gardening has been acknowledged by research to have a positive impact on refugees' mental health post-resettlement. Gerber et al (2017) for example, discuss the challenges service providers face in the United States to address refugees' mental health needs, as the healthcare system is expensive, and Western focused. In response, community gardens are used, which seem to significantly alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression. Similarly, in a study on the health effect of gardening on racial and ethnic minority urban populations in the United States by Beavers et al (2022), participants reported that gardening improved their mood and relieved stress. This was also reported by Biglin (2020) whose findings underline that allotment tending in the North West of the UK is therapeutic for refugees who can find continuity with their past and present selves. This shows how gardening activities alongside their mental health benefits can also encourage cultural relations. Gichunge and Kidwaro (2014) reveal how through gardening, resettled refugees can grow with little or no cost traditional fruits and vegetables that may not be as easily accessible in their destination country. As a result, what Fran was highlighting is that by giving refugees access to allotments not only does this have a therapeutic effect on their mental health but also creates a bridge of cultural understanding between service providers and their clients, whilst giving them a sense of familiarity and connection to their predominantly Syrian roots. In terms of

understanding vulnerability, Fran's case exemplifies how responses to vulnerability should not be dependent on the guidelines provided by institutions and authority and that more creative ways could be used to support refugees in their integration.

A second theme related to vulnerability is highlighted by Rabia, an officer at The Forum, a VCS initiative based in Middlesbrough. For Rabia people are vulnerable when they first arrive because 'they are just like children' (Interview #18, 23 October 2020). As soon as families arrive in the North East,

they have to try things. To know if they're doing it right or wrong. Then they have to ask all day other people so they would know it looks achievable. They don't know how to do things themselves (ibid).

Rabia's understanding of vulnerability emphasizes a paternalistic framing of the refugee who needs to be cared for as if they are a child. On the one hand, this stems from policies of refugee protection, which to provide meaningful support, they often have a paternalistic attitude (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). On the other hand, the paternalistic framing aligns with the expectations of 'authentic' refugeehood I discussed in chapter two. For an individual to be worthy of protection, they should represent behaviours that are considered passive or victim-like (Nyers, 2006). In this case, the refugee worthiness is connected to child-like behaviours and the expectations of care aligned with that.

One of the reasons Rabia highlights individuals are like children when they arrive in the North East, is the language barrier they are experiencing:

when they have to move from one place to another place and the language is completely strange for them, they can't say what they want to say, they can't voice their emotions, their situations, they can't express their feelings. That will make them [...] vulnerable (Rabia, Interview #18, 23 October 2020).

The vulnerability caused by the language barrier was also highlighted by Lindsay, the Support Worker for Durham County Council:

Language makes people vulnerable. We work with families who are vulnerable because they don't speak English as a first language. Their surroundings are English, they are vulnerable because they don't understand what's happening (Interview #27, 21 October 2021).

Refugees' vulnerability related to their lack of language skills is exacerbated by the system which is not friendly at all to those who do not speak the language. Bridget a founding member and leading officer of the North East Solidarity and Teaching (N.E.S.T.) initiative based in Newcastle, highlighted the difficulties people face trying to access healthcare. For example, if someone has an emergency and attempts to call 911, she says, 'it's 10 steps before you can ask for an interpreter' meaning that someone with limited English would be unable to communicate successfully with the operator to discuss their health emergency (Interview #16, 9 September 2021). Bridget then pointed out that 'when the system doesn't allow people to access support, that puts them in a very dangerous position [...]' (ibid).

Susan, taking this a step further, underlined that 'people can sometimes take advantage of refugees because they don't understand what is going on around them' (Interview #25, 23 November 2021). Both quotes suggest that when the system does not allow people to access support, this exacerbates their vulnerabilities. This emphasises not only the different kinds of vulnerabilities individuals may be experiencing but also the different ways the same aspect of vulnerability may be viewed. For example, language problems refugees faced were discussed by Rabia in a patronising way, portraying refugees as children, whilst Bridget is critical of services that do not provide adequate support to those with language barriers. As Bridget put it in disappointment: 'a lot of the time, I think it's not the people that are vulnerable but the way that our society is set up' (Interview #16, 9 September 2021).

Bridget's insights link back to the theoretical considerations on precarity and vulnerability I have discussed in chapter 2. The social institutions humans have developed to provide protection against an unstable world (Turner, 2006) are forced by the contemporary neoliberal modernity to fail leaving individuals exposed to precarity.

This is evident in the system's inability to deliver services successfully and to address the needs of 'vulnerable' people that depend on its reliability. Placing the onus of vulnerability onto society rather than the people who have been pathologized because of it offers a better understanding to how vulnerability should be viewed and addressed. It underscores a society with an enhanced sense of collective responsibility where vulnerability and the inherent dependence that is attached to the human condition, is not stigmatised and perceived negatively. In turn, if vulnerability is seen as a collective concern, this emphasises the need for policy changes that recognise the importance of growing as opposed to shrinking, welfare support. This can be further understood by the following excerpt from Mohamed from NERS:

I don't think every asylum seeker and every refugee is vulnerable. On the contrary, most of them are quite resourceful, resilient and I think they need the time to identify the problem properly. I think there is an industry built around being vulnerable and they want refugees and asylum seekers to sit there and say nothing. I am proud of our organization because here, we give refugees and asylum seekers the necessary skills they need to have a voice and ask about their rights (Interview #13, 28 October 2020).

Mohamed is showing that the notion of 'vulnerability' as defined by international policy is problematic and that many people are not vulnerable in the way imagined. This is important as it underlines the account of vulnerability I am suggesting in this thesis; it shows a counter-narrative to that of international policy that emphasises the significance of not always accepting vulnerability as it is assumed.

Despite Mohamed's clarity about the problems surrounding the notion of 'vulnerability' in international policy, his choice of words to explain this reveal that his understanding of the concept of vulnerability might also reflect specific orientations in worldview. His emphasis on refugees being 'resourceful' and 'resilient' draws on two terms which are deeply rooted within the neoliberal narrative. According to this narrative, individuals are required to be resilient subjects that adapt to change - they just need the necessary skills to succeed (Chandler, 2016).

A reason why Mohamed might have used these terms to discuss the concept of vulnerability is because of the way the neoliberal narrative affects the VCS's work with refugees. Mary, an officer at Comfrey Project, highlights how 'vulnerability' is used as a neoliberal tool within the VCS:

Referring to individuals as 'refugees' or labelling them as 'vulnerable' is a bit old-fashioned. These are terms we mainly use when we are trying to sell what we do as a charity to a funder, or to the public. But within the VCS it's not used as much anymore. [...] at our charity we don't use these words for our users and the whole attitude is that we are not there to provide a service. We are there to support people to own their own betterment of their lives. Because they can do it if you just give them that space, listening and the appropriate tools that other people have more readily available to them.

Whilst aware of the way the VCS utilizes the label of 'vulnerability' against the narratives of neoliberalism, as suggested with Mohamed, Mary also echoes a neoliberal understanding of vulnerability which urges that anyone considered 'vulnerable' should become resilient and capable of change. This promotes an understanding of vulnerability by the VCS that does not allow refugees to be dependent and where 'help' should only be provided in the form of support and not a full service. It is also important to note from this excerpt how austerity has

interfered in the VCS's capacity to act independently in its understandings of vulnerability from the neoliberal narrative. This is exemplified in Mary's mention of using the term 'vulnerable' to sell what the charity does to a funder or the public. This suggests that vulnerability has turned into a buzzword which is used to support their funding applications. As I showed in chapter six, funding for the VCS alongside local government was significantly reduced from 2008 onwards due to the austerity cuts implemented by the government at the time. Because of the way vulnerability has been implemented in policies of refugee support from 2015 onwards, the term opens a route to funding related to those considered 'vulnerable' which was significantly reduced in the past. This has allowed the VCS to continue its valuable work even if it means they must succumb to the uses of vulnerability implemented by the neoliberal narrative.

In conclusion, it is important to note that first, unlike local authorities, the VCS does not automatically refer to the UNHCR 'vulnerability' criteria, leading to a more open and nebulous understanding of vulnerability. Nevertheless, a closer look at the VCS's understanding of the concept of vulnerability shows that it is largely rooted in a neoliberal perspective, according to which 'vulnerability' is seen as a barrier to resilience. Arguably, this is a result of the pressures the VCS faced from austerity, hostility and the growing numbers of people seeking refuge in the North East from 2015 onwards. In chapter six I showed that the combination of these three factors led existing charities to strategize and establish new partnerships with each other. Part of these strategies are exemplified in the way organizations view vulnerability. Two main themes of vulnerability emerged as barriers to resilience, which often are pre-assumed by the neoliberal state as integration-oriented following resettlement: mental health and limited language skills. Both local authorities and the VCS emphasized the need to equip refugees with the necessary skills and tools to overcome the 'vulnerability' that rendered them suitable for resettlement. Additionally, both groups mobilise the term

‘vulnerability’ to secure government funding that has been limited with the austerity measures of the neoliberal state. This underlines the fact that both groups are working within, and with, thoroughly neoliberal structures that are fundamentally linked to the institutionalised use of the term ‘vulnerability’.

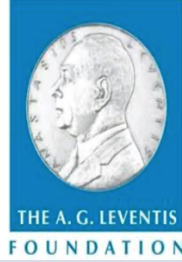
Resettled refugees’ understanding of vulnerability

The word vulnerability was communicated in various ways to participants. The first communication of vulnerability was through the poster shared with participants at the start of every interview. The poster is shown in Figures 10 and 11 below.

There is a section on the poster (figure 10) stating in Arabic that I research the VPRS in the North East of England. In this instance, the interpreter translated directly the scheme’s name as ‘Resettlement Plan for Vulnerable People’:

‘خطة إعادة توطين الأشخاص المستضعفين’

(khutat 'iieadat tawtin al'ashkhas almustadeafin)



من أنا؟

جورجيا ديميتريو
باحثة دكتوراه - جامعة دورهام.

ما الذي أبحث عنه؟

- 'خطة إعادة توطين الأشخاص المستضعفين'
شمال شرق إنجلترا.

ما هو الهدف من هذا البحث؟

لفهم استخدام كلمة "الضعف" في مخططات إعادة التوطين.
لتحسين تجربة الحياة اليومية للأشخاص الذين أعيد توطينهم في شمال شرق إنجلترا.

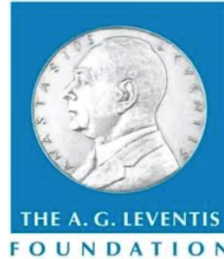
لماذا انت مدعو للمشاركة؟

لأنك من الذين أعيد توطينهم في شمال شرق إنجلترا عبر خطة إعادة توطين الأشخاص المستضعفين

هل يجب عليك المشاركة؟

المشاركة طوعية وليس عليك الموافقة على المشاركة.
إذا وافقت ، سنقوم بمحادثتك بناءً على سلسلة من الأسئلة خلال جلستنا لمدة 45 دقيقة.
يمكنك حذف الأسئلة التي لا ترغب في الإجابة عليها.
مشاركتك ستكون مجهولة.

Figure 10: Part one of poster shared to participants



ماذا سنناقش؟

- ✓ تجربتك مع أيامك الأولى في الشمال الشرقي.
- ✓ إذا كان البرنامج يغطي كل ما تحتاجه لبدء حياة جديدة هنا.
- ✓ إن لم يكن كذلك ، فما هي الأشياء الأخرى التي وجدتتها مفيدة.
- ✓ يوم عادي في حياتك قبل COVID-19 وما الذي تغير منذ بداية الوباء.
- ✓ كيف ترى مستقبلك في الشمال الشرقي.
- ✓ إذا كان بإمكانك إثارة القضايا والاستماع إليك باحترام.

كيف يمكننا البقاء على اتصال بعد لقاء اليوم؟

✓ هاتفي / بريدي الإلكتروني: 07521944454 / georgia.dimitriou@durham.ac.uk

Figure 11: Part two of poster shared with participants

The word used for ‘vulnerable’ was ‘مُسْتَضْعَف’ (mustadeafin) which according to several online dictionaries means ‘weak’, ‘lacking vitality and energy’, ‘made weak and thin’, ‘feeble’ or ‘underdog’ (Almaany 2023; Bab.la, 2023; Reverso, 2023). Regrettably, at the time I did not consider the importance of discussing with the interpreter who translated the poster how they were to translate vulnerability. Undeniably, this would have given another layer of understanding to the concept. As a result, at the time of writing I am relying on online Arabic to English dictionaries to translate the interpreter’s work. During the interview, when I would ask participants if they were familiar with the term vulnerable (as part of the ‘Vulnerable’ Persons Resettlement Scheme they arrived in the UK with), the interpreter would approach this in two ways. Firstly, the interpreter would ask in Arabic if the participants were familiar with the English word vulnerability. Most of the participants were not and then the interpreter would proceed with ‘مُسْتَضْعَف’ (mustadeafin), or different explanations of the word such as those mentioned above. Since we were at the midst of a pandemic, medically ‘vulnerable’ individuals were often used as an example to make the link of a more general vulnerability and the way it would come up within a contemporary British context.

The interpreter’s explanation of the word influenced the way participants reflected on their understanding of vulnerability if they were not familiar with the word. Iqra and Aziz for example, defined people who are vulnerable as ‘people who are not feeling well. People who are old, who have some health condition. People who are in danger to go back to their country. People who are weak’ (Interview #38, 19 November 2021). Similarly, Rida described that ‘vulnerable people might be the ones who have severe diseases or mental health issues. Or people who are neglected in the society’ (Interview #41, 20 September 2021). Fatima’s overall understanding of vulnerability also highlights Rida’s understanding of people who are neglected in society:

One day I saw a gentleman next to Asda asking for money from people. In my opinion this is a vulnerable person. I want to support him, help him because he arrived in this situation... maybe he wasn't getting any support (Interview #29, 19 October 2021).

Iqra, Aziz, Rida and Fatima's reflection of vulnerability echoes the dictionary descriptions of the word from Arabic which mostly portrays the term as weakness. Participants like Maira and Fadi (Interview #40, 22 October 2021) who were more familiar with the word both in English and in Arabic dived immediately into their own experiences of vulnerability:

We had no choice to leave the country because of the war so we left everything behind us. Our home, everything. Because of these reasons we are vulnerable people. We had to move to other Arabic country but unfortunately life in Arabic countries sometimes is not easy. We stayed in Lebanon for three years and then we moved to Egypt. Egypt was better than Lebanese people but it was difficult to find job and have a life over there (Fadi).

We were really tired. We were tired because we felt we lost everything, we had to move to other country and then to other country, it was not easy. It was so difficult for us (Maira).

The vulnerability refugees experienced before resettlement in host countries is a theme that kept reappearing in conversations with participants. Fadi for example outlined:

I lived in Lebanon for six years. I felt vulnerable there but there you are really vulnerable. No one can help you. It's the same language but people there are very different, they will ask us, 'who are you, why do you talk our language? Why did you take our jobs? You took our houses. You didn't leave anything for us (Interview #37, 20 September 2021).

A similar experience was underlined by Wajiha in Turkey:

I think we were vulnerable especially when we left Syria and we moved to Turkey. For seven years we were facing a lot of racism. People asked us why we are here, why you don't go

back to your country? Unfortunately, it is not under our control. We didn't choose to be outside of our country (Interview #39, 22 October 2021).

Wajiha also explained that even though Turkey is a predominantly Islamic country, she and her family did not feel safe: 'Our wish was to have some country to make us feel safe, to feel it's our home. We didn't feel that in Turkey' (ibid). The lack of safety was also raised by Omar:

In Lebanon we speak the same language, but I felt so vulnerable there. Why? Because in Lebanon I didn't feel safe. That I don't have a home. That there is no future for me as a refugee in Lebanon (Interview #31, 21 September 2021).

Existing literature reports and governmental plans have already highlighted the discrimination, hostility and prejudice faced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Turkey. For example, a UNHCR 'vulnerability' assessment report from 2015 indicated that 69% of Syrian refugees felt insecure in Lebanon due to verbal or physical harassment (UNHCR, 2015). This is further supported by Saab et al (2017) who state that Syrian refugees in Lebanon have been subjected to discriminative practices such as evening curfews and violent attacks. Syrian refugees in Turkey have faced similar discrimination with reports indicating that Turkish citizens, despite the government's emphasis on shared religion and the significance of solidarity, display an increased level of prejudice towards Syrian refugees (Lazarev and Sharma, 2015). Meanwhile, a joint crisis response plan of the Government of Lebanon and the United Nations highlight the lack of educational opportunities for children in Lebanon (Government of Lebanon and OCHA, 2014). Additionally, Elçi et al (2021) outline how even highly educated Syrian women in Turkey face difficulties to find a job that matches their skills and educational background, whilst Cherri et al (2017) discuss how Syrian refugee women in Lebanon are subjected to early marriage compared to the norm in Syria due to the

uncertainty and financial insecurities they face, emphasising the need for free sexual and reproductive health services for those married early. Challenges around refugee access to health services are also outlined by Achiri and Ibrahim (2022), who discuss how these were exacerbated in Turkey during the outbreak of Covid-19. The anti-refugee sentiment documented in these reports from the last 10 years has been on the rise globally, with the Covid-10 lockdowns being a turning point to even sharper forms of discrimination that is constantly growing.

Several participants described how resettlement in the UK helped ameliorate the discrimination, hostility and prejudice they experienced in Lebanon and Turkey. Wajiha for example, described how post-resettlement in the North East she feels she is treated equally to British citizens:

I don't feel I am vulnerable because when I am here, they treat me as a human. Not like other the country, which was also a Muslim country, and they were treating us differently. Living here I feel I have the right for a lot of things in the law. I am treated the same as British people (Interview #39, 22 October 2021).

An emphasis on human and legal rights was also put forth by Halima. I asked her if she feels vulnerable in the North East. She said that if I had asked her this question in her first days of arrival in the UK, her answer would have been different, but she doesn't feel vulnerable anymore (Halima, Interview #30, 20 September 2021). In particular, she does not feel vulnerable anymore 'because this country has become something related to me', she described (ibid). She is not vulnerable anymore because she understands the regulations, her rights, and the fact that she feels protected by the law (ibid).

Significantly, human and legal rights for some are not compromised by a lack of English language skills. Wajiha explained that even though she does not speak the language, people in

the North East accept her and try to understand her and help her as well (Interview #39, 22 October 2021). This is also exemplified by Fadi and Maira who explained that in the UK they now feel a lot better. ‘People in the North East are very nice and welcoming’ (Interview #40, 22 October 2021), they described. Because of the language, integration into society is a slow process for them but they do not feel that this is an issue that exacerbates existing or creates new vulnerabilities. Refugees at this point provide a totally different assessment of vulnerability that focuses on vulnerabilities they have overcome rather than vulnerabilities they are dealing with now. This could be a result of how they perceive the interview arrangement with me, the comparison of past experiences and cultural or linguistic differences in how vulnerability is understood by them and other actors above. Their version of the story suggests that the scheme is working, at least to some degree, despite the more critical assessments I have shown earlier.

Nevertheless, existing research emphasises that many refugees have aspirations at the start of resettlement which are often adjusted and minimised within the first years of resettlement due to difficulties with the language, the labour market, educational equality and mental health (Aksoy et al, 2020; Arendt et al, 2020; Bonet, 2021; Brell et al, 2020; Kurt et al, 2023; Michelini, 2020). Most participants I interviewed were within the three-year timeframe and may at the time of the interview have still been in the process of adjusting and minimising those aspirations.

For Fatima, the experience of vulnerability was the opposite. She outlined how she did not feel vulnerable before resettlement and emphasised her gratefulness to God and for being lucky:

I didn't feel vulnerable. In the end if I was strong, I would show strength to my children. For example, I am always grateful to God. My house was bombed. Luckily, we were not in the

house at the time. Also, one day a man holding a gun came to the house and the children were sleeping. He passed them and didn't see them. If he saw them maybe he would kill them. It is things like these that made me grateful to God and felt stronger, not vulnerable (Interview #29, 19 October 2021).

Fatima did not feel vulnerable because vulnerability in Arabic, as discussed earlier, is associated with weakness or being the underdog and as she described, she felt strong. This strength was deeply rooted in gratitude and faith in God. Sim et al (2023) indicate that positive reframing, problem solving, planning and turning to religion are some of the coping mechanisms parents of refugee background use in resettlement to deal with various types of stressors. Moreover, gratitude is useful in minimizing depression and anxiety and encourages a sense of positive subjective well-being (Jovančević and Milićević, 2021; Yoo, 2020).

Fatima reflected on her pre-resettlement experiences with gratitude and religion. This suggests that gratitude and religion may have been her coping mechanisms for all the negative experiences she endured before resettlement.

I then asked Fatima if she feels vulnerable living in the North East. She highlighted that she sometimes feels vulnerable because of her lack of communication with British people. First, because of her limited English. Second, because of the lack of cultural awareness she has observed from people in Britain. She then described an incident that occurred with her daughter's school:

My daughter had a test in school, where she had to talk about war. She had a lot of information about that, so she wrote everything. She was happy because she was able to answer this question. She mentioned that the war happened because of greedy people a long time ago. The school rang the police and the police visited me in my house! I didn't know what was going on. They said that the school had sent a report to the police saying that my

daughter is an extremist! I was shocked. Why didn't the school contact me directly and they contacted the police first? Why didn't they talk to her parents first before that? I didn't accept that. Extremism, even for us as Muslims, we don't agree with it. They are doing very bad things. We would never want our children to do such things. I spoke with the police and tried to explain. My daughter was there to support me with the language. After that the police apologised. 'We don't know why the school reported that to the police', they said. It was a stressful time. If my daughter was reported as an extremist, what would happen to her? Her life would end. After this I had a conversation with the school as well. Why they didn't contact me directly. The school said sorry. That this was a misunderstanding and that they will try and find out who sent this email to the police. After that they said it's just a misunderstanding and the story ended. But if this carried on, what would have happened to my daughter? What about her future? How would she carry on? We don't know why they reported that. All the information my daughter wrote was also in the media. Why did they think that coming from her, this was extremist? (Fatima, Interview #29, 19 October 2021)

The incident Fatima described is an example of how the UK government has forced schools to surveil their pupils under the name of tackling extremism. This is linked to the school's duty under 'prevent' legislation. The UK government has contributed to the international community's attempt to standardize policies to counter violent extremism (Kundnani and Hayes, 2018). As part of an anti-radicalisation strategy significantly concerned with 'violent Islamism' (Home Office, 2011, p.13), the government revised its 2011 'prevent' policy language to focus on 'extremism' rather than 'terrorism' (Jerome et al, 2019). In this instance, extremism was defined as a 'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs' (Home Office, 2011, p.107). To prevent extremism, 'prevent' also introduced 'Channel'. A programme piloted in 2007 which eventually became statutory in

2015 which ‘focuses on providing support at an early state to people who are at risk of radicalisation, supporting terrorism or committing terrorist acts’ (HM Government, 2023, p.11). Individuals who may be considered ‘vulnerable’ to extremism are referred to ‘Channel’ which then uses a Vulnerability Assessment Framework ‘to guide decisions about whether someone needs support to address their risks of supporting terrorism or committing terrorist acts as a consequence of radicalisation and the kind of support that they need’ (ibid, p. 62). Exemplifying a new frame in which vulnerability can be interpreted, ‘vulnerability’ in this instance is assessed with the help of the following three criteria:

- Engagement with a group, cause, or ideology
- Intent to cause harm
- Capability to cause harm

The ‘prevent’ strand applied to education since its conception in 2003 but publicised in 2006 with the Education and Inspection Act which placed a statutory duty on schools ‘to promote community cohesion’ (Phillips et al, 2010, p.11). The government feared that radical Islam would be spread in British schools, thus it was important that British values were exercised in education (Green, 2017). This fear peaked in 2014 with the Trojan Horse Affair, when an anonymous document sent to Birmingham City Council in 2013 threatening to spread radical Islamism to British schools, was leaked to the press (Education Committee, 2015). As a result, the government placed ‘prevent’s’ list of values as the focus of citizenship education in schools and emphasised further the importance of monitoring extremism in schools (Green, 2017). The incident Fatima described exemplifies this monitoring of extremism in British schools but also portrays the issues that can arise from such monitoring.

A report by Kundnani (2009) summarises well two key problems that can arise with the application of ‘prevent’ at the local level:

- Local authorities are dictated to accept ‘prevent’ funding in direct proportion to the number of Muslim residents in their area. In effect, this targets the Muslim population as a suspect group.
- There is an increasing pressure from ‘prevent’ funded VCS organisations and local authority workers to inform the police about young Muslims they encounter and their political and religious point of views.

The targeting of young Muslims is also identified within the context of British schools. For example, the government’s attempts to foster British values amongst young Britons in school through anti-radicalisation Islamist strategies targets young British Muslims (Mattei and Broeks, 2016). Drawing from research on the perspectives of young British Muslims of Bengali background from a neighbourhood in London, Green (2017) outlines that young British Muslims find that learning about British values from formal education is not necessary since they already acquired this knowledge by virtue of their dual British and Bengali identity. In fact, the school’s efforts to administer British values make students feel pressured to weaken their religious beliefs, as they felt that ‘their school perceived their religion as a threat, betraying an implicit framing of British identity in opposition to Islam’ (ibid, p.251). Arguably, this also targets young Muslims of refugee background resettled in the UK and attempting to integrate in the society. Whilst students such as Fatima’s daughter are still learning about British values as part of their integration into British society, it is important that this is learnt in a way that does not make the young individual feel that their religion is perceived as a threat to the community they are integrating in. I did not have a chance to speak to Fatima’s daughter because she was under 18 at the time of fieldwork, but discussing this with Fatima she said that this incident made her as a mother, feel ‘very vulnerable’ (Interview #29, 19 October 2021). This feeling of vulnerability, as she explained, stemmed in her inability ‘to explain [her] culture and religion to the school’ (ibid). Fatima, as

a mother of a young Muslim in the North East of England felt that herself and her daughter were targeted by the school and its efforts to administer British values which was tuned for the last fifteen years to place these values opposite Islam. In effect, at this stage, placing British values opposite Islam has been ingrained into the ethos of the school and its pedagogic approaches. Arguably, this sets obstacles both for the individuals to immerse into the school community and eventually integrate within British society, but also for the school and its obligation to support new people arriving in the area.

Connecting this back to vulnerability, two vastly different understandings of vulnerability are evident from Fatima's story, which are applied to the same subjects. First, is the notion of vulnerability put forward by the government's 'prevent' programme to tackle extremism which frames 'vulnerability' as the capability or intent to cause harm. Second, are the integration-oriented vulnerabilities caused by the school's compulsory implementation of anti-extremism protocol which positions British values opposite Islam, the dominant religion amongst refugees resettled to the UK via the VPRS. These two understandings emphasise that there is a limit to the notion of 'welcome' towards refugees, even for those arriving in the UK by schemes such as the VPRS.

To summarise, vulnerability for refugees resettled in the North East of England is a multifaceted concept that appears within the contexts of pre-resettlement and post-resettlement. Nevertheless, experiences for each refugee encountered through this research varied. Whilst a significant number felt more vulnerable before resettlement due to the hostility, they were experiencing in host countries like Lebanon and Turkey, Fatima's example underscores how individuals can also feel vulnerable once resettled in the UK.

Conclusion

Overall, there are three levels of vulnerability which can be drawn from the three actor groups analysed in the previous three chapters. First, the vulnerabilities that deemed refugees eligible for resettlement to the UK as per the UNHCR ‘vulnerability’ criteria that local authorities applied in dispensing services to them. Second, the vulnerabilities refugees faced in their host countries before resettlement which were added onto those ‘primary vulnerabilities’, creating additional needs in resettlement. Third, the integration-oriented vulnerabilities refugees faced after resettlement in the North East of England, which are oftentimes quite different to the ‘vulnerabilities’ that elicited their inclusion in the VPRS in the first place.

The ‘vulnerabilities’ listed by UNHCR that render refugees eligible for resettlement to the UK can be summarised as legal and physical protection needs; survivors of torture or violence; medical needs; women and girls at risk; family reunification; children and adolescents at risk; lack of foreseeable alternative durable solutions. These are the general understandings of ‘vulnerability’ that local authorities needed to work with when they first started setting up the logistics of the VPRS but also when they prepared to welcome a family. These also feed a normative understanding of being a ‘refugee’, which the VCS must work with when they apply for funding or communicate with the public on the work that they do. Significantly, when refugees attempted to set out a more general understanding on the concept of vulnerability, separate from their direct experiences, it is these understandings of ‘vulnerability’ that are reflected in their words.

Understandings of vulnerability before resettlement are deeply rooted in the hostility refugees were experiencing after they fled the conflict in Syria and were residing in one of the host countries. Refugees of the scheme I spoke with had experiences from Lebanon, Egypt and

Turkey. They were deeply disappointed with how predominantly Islamic and Arabic speaking countries could not be welcoming to the extent that they did not feel safe as refugees seeking protection. Local authorities did not seem to be aware of the hostility refugees were experiencing before resettlement and their assumptions on vulnerability were all shaped by the general criteria of ‘vulnerability’ set out by UNCHR. This is because when the responsibilities of the local authority begin, they effectively are only concerned with the experiences that deemed refugees eligible for resettlement. Interestingly, the descriptions of local authorities seemed to merge refugees’ experiences in Syria and later in their host country before their resettlement in the UK, even though there is a quite evident distinction in refugees’ experiences that is specific to their life in the host country they sought protection in after they fled Syria. The VCS did not touch on concepts of vulnerability before resettlement, apart from the assumptions that are often made regarding refugees and mental health.

The integration-oriented vulnerabilities refugees face after they resettled in the North East of England were the most discussed by all groups of participants. This is expected as all three groups of participants have experience from the ground and do not need to rely on the UNHCR criteria or any assumptions shaped by the media. Lack of language skills was the main area of concern refugees seemed to be experiencing. Interestingly, not all participants of refugee background labelled their lack of English language skills as a vulnerability.

Contrasting their experiences of vulnerability in their host country pre-resettlement, the majority seemed reluctant to label the difficulties they may be facing in the North East due to the language because of the other benefits they are receiving such as the human and legal rights which was a serious concern for many families who resided in Lebanon and Turkey. Fatima was the only one who directly identified her experience with limited English in post-resettlement as a vulnerability. This may be because of the incident with ‘prevent’ legislation she described which ingrained a greater sense of insecurity for her and her family.

Nevertheless, it may also have to do with the gratitude participants would often feel after resettlement that is almost preventing them from acknowledging the difficulties they are experiencing. The language barrier seems to also be a main area of concern both from local authorities and the VCS as the less English an individual acquires, the more dependent they would be on their services. In the next and penultimate chapter, I discuss vulnerability in more depth, analysing how the understandings of the concept link to dependency, deservingness and neoliberalism.

Chapter 9- Reconsidering the Concept of Vulnerability

Introduction

The previous chapter outlined how local authorities, the VCS, and resettled refugees interpreted the concept of vulnerability. Through the understandings of these actors, the chapter described three layers of vulnerability in operation. First, there were the vulnerabilities that rendered refugees eligible for resettlement to the UK as per the UNHCR ‘vulnerability’ criteria. Second, there were vulnerabilities that refugees faced in their host countries before resettlement. And third, there were integration-oriented vulnerabilities that refugees face after resettlement as they remake their lives in the North East of England. Through these forms of vulnerability, it became evident that assumptions of what vulnerability should look like shaped significantly the approaches and tendencies towards the concept from different actors. This penultimate chapter aims to return to the concept of vulnerability in its political and ideological dimension to consider what type of subjects the VPRS produces and what kinds of subjectivity the mobilisation of vulnerability entails. I will argue that the VPRS has rendered the term ‘vulnerability’ as a bordering device which extracts value from refugees’ lives and produces the good refugee and the neoliberal subject. I will then consider what type of citizen and/or non-citizen is produced through vulnerability and how this then in turn drives the production of unequal lives.

‘Vulnerability’: a model for resettlement

One of the objectives of this thesis was to understand how the term ‘vulnerability’ is used in the practice of refugee resettlement. In chapter two I discussed how the term ‘refugee’ became a legal category in the way we know it today after World War II when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1951 and the

Refugee Convention came into being (Malkki, 1995b). The legalisation of the status of the refugee and its international recognition has created a process of categorisation of people based on bureaucratically assumed needs (Zetter, 1991). In the last decades, forced migration patterns have become even more complex, politicising the refugee label and embedding it within a wider political discourse of hostility to refugees and migrants (Zetter, 2007). Within this discourse the refugee label is adapted according to the needs of the institutions managing them. As a result, individuals seeking refuge have become even more dependent on governments to authorise their ability to move across different spaces, in comparison to the applications of the Refugee convention, highlighting that states have now monopolised 'the legitimate means of movement' (Torpey, 1998, p.240). Schemes of refugee resettlement such as the VPRS, have made 'vulnerability' an integral part of this monopoly of legitimised movement. Arguably, the case of the UK, shows how states have been using the legal category of 'vulnerability' to facilitate their own bordering agendas, extracting value from the lives of refugees via the use of 'vulnerability'. This renders the concept a tool used by neoliberal governments and facilitated by intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations to tighten their border control.

Using 'vulnerability' as a tool that facilitates border control is part of the policy drive that restricts refugee protection, underscoring the ambivalence that Derrida identified with such protection on a philosophical level. Derrida (2000) says that genuine hospitality towards refugee and migrant Others is impossible. Any attempt to behave hospitably is partly betrothed to the sovereign keeping of guests under control, to the closing of boundaries, nationalism and exclusion of particular groups or ethnicities. In practice, Darling (2018; 2016) shows that the related notion of 'welcome' has a fragility that is always at risk of being suppressed or depoliticised, through constraining political debate and framing individuals as a 'burden'. In the case of the VPRS, individuals are welcomed into the country but only under

the criterion of 'vulnerability'. Whilst the narrative constructed for resettlement is deeply rooted on humanitarian rules such as vulnerability (Ramsøy, 2022) since the launch of the VPRS, the consecutive Conservative governments in power have been tightening individuals' rights to seek protection outside VPRS in the UK. This is in line with the wider set of 'hostile environment' policies. At the pinnacle of these efforts, on the 25th of April 2024 Prime Minister Rishi Sunak managed, after two years of negotiations, for the 'Rwanda Bill' to become law. This is a law that legitimises the deportation of asylum seekers who arrived in the UK irregularly to Rwanda, where they are expected to seek asylum, and if successful, enjoy protection (Thompson, 2024). Additionally, to the deportations planned through the 'Rwanda Bill', the government at the time was willing to offer up to £3000 per failed asylum seeker claim if the asylum seeker agreed to relocate to Rwanda (Gregory, 2024). This would include a package of support for five years that would provide individuals with housing, training, work and study (ibid). This was planned to be a part of Visa and Immigration's broader voluntary return service for those who could not return to their country of origin but were also considered illegal in the UK (Whannel, 2024). This recent example shows that the lack of humanitarian support towards asylum seekers was not a matter of budgeting and austerity, as much of the criticism against the Bill noted its exorbitant costs. In fact, it underscores the extent of the hostile environment and the determination of the state to tighten its border control. Currently, the 'Rwanda Bill' is revoked with the new Labour government in power. Nevertheless, the deportations are continued and publicity around them intensified, underscoring how the 'hostile environment' has not only not been reversed but also acquired legitimacy through the different governments in power, claiming their own branding of specific hostile policies.

As discussed in chapter three, a common practice to the UK government's austerity drive was for several government- supported services to be outsourced to private companies aiming to make a profit. Evidence of privatisation, amongst others, can be found in education, the prison service, and accommodation and support for the Asylum Dispersal System (Berry, 2016; Darling, 2022; Mendoza, 2017; O'Hara, 2015). In line with this, the UK government is now outsourcing protection rights of those it considers not to be eligible of becoming a 'good' refugee. In fact, the government is moving into a model where only schemes of resettlement based on 'vulnerability' criteria can produce 'good' refugees. Linking this back to Butler's notion of grievability, the only grievable refugees are therefore those framed by states as 'good'. Everyone else arriving spontaneously and via irregular routes is categorised as a 'bad' refugee, explicitly labelled as illegal and therefore unwelcome and ungrievable. As a result, the interpretation of 'vulnerability' in the practice of refugee resettlement shows a 'humanitarian reason' (Fassin and Gomme, 2012, p.xii), where the debate around refugeehood is no longer about refugees versus migrants or the protection of those in need. It is about the state picking some refugees over others and basing the choice on criteria that are much narrower than the political persecution mandated in the Refugee Convention.

The following sections will discuss what it means to be a 'good refugee' to exemplify how the VPRS enforces 'vulnerability' as a bordering practice. As a result of this, the section after will show how young refugees utilise neoliberalism's entrepreneurial approach to self in embodying this 'good refugee' paradigm.

The 'good refugee'

In chapter four I mentioned that participants asked me during interviews to pass on their gratitude to the local authorities who helped them start a new life in the UK. Whilst expressing gratitude may be linked to my role as a researcher at the university and how

participants perceive my relationship with local authorities, it may also be linked to a heightened awareness of a ‘privilege’ offered by the VPRS in comparison to other Syrian nationals who settled in the UK via the Asylum Dispersal System and to other refugees who experienced the hostility of immigration the last few years.

Aziz and Iqra for example, described how they have friends who are also refugees or asylum seekers but came on their own to seek refuge in the North East of England (Interview #38, 19 November 2021). They emphasized that ‘the support they get is not like the support we have’ and that their friends also say to them that ‘we don’t have support like you’, highlighting that ‘there is a big difference between the refugees coming through the scheme and the people who don’t’ (ibid). When I asked them to provide examples of these differences they highlighted how every time they struggled the council helped them. Particularly, they referred to the support worker who would come in a council car and take them to the GP, to the supermarket, or any other appointments they would have (ibid). They also highlighted that in their first year in the North East the council would organize a gathering for families resettled in the remit of the local authority via the VPRS and provide food; ‘like a social’ as they described, which was ‘not provided to other refugees or asylum seekers’ in the area (ibid).

What Aziz and Iqra describe, echoes the notions of deservingness arising from everchanging immigration policies already explored in migration and refugee studies. In the last 20 years, most immigration policy changes both in the UK and Europe as host countries, have been geared towards restricting and tightening control of refugee protection across their borders (Emma and Mulvey, 2013; Gatrell, 2013; Lewis et al, 2012). For example, in 2015 the European Commission advocated for a system of refugee relocation from Greece and Italy to other European Union member states emphasizing the significance ‘of good “matches” between refugees and countries of relocation’ (Basshuysen, 2017, p.3). In this instance, specific characteristics and qualifications of applicants were taken into consideration,

examples including language skills or social and cultural connections to the relocation state that would allow for a smoother integration (ibid). A similar approach can be identified with the application of the VPRS. As outlined in previous chapters, for an individual to be resettled to the UK, it was required for the UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) to decide on the suitability of the referred refugee: whether the VPRS can meet the resettlement needs of the applicant and their dependants; if the resettlement of the applicant and their dependants would be unfavourable to the public good; and if resettlement in the UK would not be in the best interests of the applicant, or their dependants (UNHCR, 2018a). Overall, such restrictions have been increasingly portraying asylum seekers outside resettlement schemes as undeserving in comparison to the deserving refugees (Sales, 2002). In essence, immigration policies distinguish between the legitimate and therefore deserving refugee, in contrast to the illegitimate and undeserving asylum seeker or undocumented migrant (Wernesjö, 2020).

In most of these cases, to become legitimate, one needs to be perceived as a victim deserving of sympathy (Fassin, 2008). Via the VPRS, as exemplified by Aziz and Iqra's case, to be legitimate, the vulnerable needs not only to fulfil the UNHCR 'vulnerability' criteria that enable refugees to be considered for resettlement (such as being in need of medical attention) but also represent the vulnerabilities assumed by the state that are attached to the concept of the legitimate refugee (not speaking any English for example).

Nevertheless, the logic of deservingness often encourages envy between refugees and asylum seekers as recipients of provision since their legal status determines the quality of provision they receive. This is exemplified in research conducted by Kreichauf (2018) on the quality of refugee accommodation in European cities, who find that individuals 'with a low likelihood of being granted asylum are usually housed in less equipped facilities than others' (p.13). Such was the case of Iqra and Aziz. When asked whether their friends have any negative feelings towards them because of the advantages they receive from the VPRS they said:

Yes. Of course. They feel jealous. They always say [we] are so lucky because [we] have the support. Not like [them]. The people of the scheme are supported (Interview #38, 19 November 2021).

Aziz and Iqra's friends may be feeling jealousy, as not only do the scheme's recipients receive equipped housing, which as noted in previous chapters is a growing issue within British society, but also receive enough support to kickstart their integration. As previously outlined, there is an increased need for social housing in Great Britain, with 1.2 million households being on local authority waiting lists as of the 31st of March 2022, in England alone (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, 2023). As a solution, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has set up new rules which will give landlords greater freedoms to carry out property extensions, open up lofts and turn shops, takeaways and betting shops into living spaces (Daly, 2023). Nevertheless, with such a proposal comes the risk of creating spaces into homes that do not meet the criteria for quality developments, adding to the pre-existing issue of unliveable housing conditions many living in social housing often endure. Such was the home of Aleena in 2021, after moving from the first home the VPRS allocated to her due to harassment and violence her and her family encountered from the neighbours. Even though Aleena and her family managed to escape the harassment and violence they were experiencing in the local authority that was hosting them for VPRS, they are still in a precarious condition as outside the VPRS, they had to settle for worse housing conditions. For refugees and asylum seekers outside of the VPRS, this is a reality they have to endure upon arrival in the country if they are lucky enough to find available social housing. In addition to the precarity of housing, refugees and asylum seekers who arrive in the country outside the VPRS need to learn how to navigate the social and economic system on which the country operates, including the housing system. Refugees of the VPRS are assigned support workers that help them with appointments, setting up bills and

introducing them to organised English classes upon arrival. As outlined by participants in chapter seven this transition hasn't been perfect for refugees of the scheme either, but it has been an organised kickstart offered by local government in specific, that other individuals do not have. Civil society has been stepping in with its "regimes of care" as Ticktin (2011) puts it, to fill in the gaps such as those necessary for integration but that is separate and offered to any displaced individuals in the area including those of the VPRS. This suggests that schemes like the VPRS may have obvious advantages in comparison to other routes of seeking protection in the UK which are significantly being reduced but this does not mean that integration and settling into the UK has been smooth for those who arrived via VPRS either.

In most cases, the logic of deservingness is internalised by refugees themselves. Clark et al (2022) explain how this internalisation of the logic of deservingness can be observed through individuals' actions to become a 'good refugee' and therefore deserving of the provision provided to them. The archetype of a 'good refugee' 'can be understood as an assemblage of characteristics that denote passivity, vulnerability, gratitude, compliance and productivity' (ibid, p.4). I did not probe Aziz and Iqra further to understand how they respond to their friends on the issue of deservingness and if they see others as less or equally deserving to them but I could infer a sense of gratitude from their side towards the local authority that helped them in comparison to other refugees. This was a sentiment that many participants expressed to me. These participants' need for me to pass on their gratitude to the local authorities may be linked to their need to be seen as a 'good refugee'. This also means that participants not identifying their everyday struggles with resettlement as vulnerabilities, could emphasise their efforts to not appear as ungrateful to the local authorities who have allowed them to escape the hostilities of the Lebanese and Turkish immigration systems. This is because as Haines and Rosenblum (2010) outline, 'the "good refugee" must become a

successful immigrant' (p.393), or have 'the ability to conform to a national standard' (ibid) of the 'existing social and cultural categories of the countries in which they resettle' (p.391).

Becoming the neoliberal subject

Neoliberal projects cross borders and largely mark most liberal democracies today. Becoming a successful immigrant across these democracies means conforming to the neoliberal incentives and drivers that shape society and convey messages over what 'success' looks like. Refugees resettled through the VPRS in the North East of England are not immune to this process. As they become neoliberal subjects, they are expected to become successful through exhibiting resilience, entrepreneurship and independence from state support.

As a proposal that 'human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (Harvey, 2005, p.2), neoliberalism shifts responsibility from the state to society and specifically the individual as an economic and entrepreneurial unit and subject, whilst eroding and stigmatising the core values promoted by the welfare state (Bellisle, 2023). This includes 'the adoption of trade, financial, environmental, and labour market policies advancing the interests of corporations and international capital; and the curtailment of the power of social movements and their supporters' (Baines, 2010, p.12). This was most evident when neoliberal governments started stripping the welfare state from labour unions, discouraging personal liberty and freedom, and making individuals more dependent on business corporations (Avedo et al, 2019). As a result, neoliberalism is not only a political economic practice, but a logic of governmentality that spread into multiple aspects of everyday life and has particularly impacted individual self-identity, self-worth, and self-perception (Foucault, 2008; Mirowski, 2014). As Adams et al (2019) explain, neoliberalism promotes 'an entrepreneurial approach to self as an ongoing

development project, an imperative for individual growth and personal fulfilment [...]’ (p.197).

The entrepreneurial approach to self is deeply rooted in resilience: a ‘key term of art for neoliberal regimes of governance’ (Chandler and Reid, 2016, p.1). In this instance, the ‘neoliberal subject [...] is and must be resilient, adaptive and vulnerable’ (ibid, p.7). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines resilience as ‘the quality or fact of being able to recover quickly or easily from, or resist being affected by, a misfortune, shock, illness, etc.; robustness; adaptability’. Following Chandler and Reid’s argument on the neoliberal subject, this definition suggests that resilience is the ability of an individual who has become vulnerable due to a misfortune, shock or illness to have the capacity to recover quickly and easily; to become robust and adaptable. In Chandler and Reid’s (2016) words:

the neoliberal subject is a subject that must permanently struggle to accommodate itself to the world. Not a subject that can conceive of changing the world, its structure and conditions of possibility; but a subject which accepts the unknowability of the world in which it lives as a condition for partaking of that world, and which accepts the necessity of the injunction to change itself and adapt in order to cope responsively with the threats and dangers now presupposed as endemic (p. 4)

Within the neoliberal narrative, ‘[v]ulnerabilities are [...] understood in terms of the barriers or limits to becoming a resilient subject’ (Chandler, 2016, p.15), with resilience deeply rooted in an individual’s capacity to adapt to change (ibid). Resilience in this instance, ‘is conceptually designed to overcome vulnerability- to contain and evade it, to bounce back from it, to minimise its traces, to domesticate its transformative power’ (Bracke, 2016, p.69).

Existing literature has already underlined how the neoliberal narrative interacts with the lives of those forcibly displaced. Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy (2025) for example, discuss how

refugee-led initiatives of social entrepreneurship in Turkey whilst providing economic opportunities, it also reinforces neoliberal frameworks, 'operat[ing] as an interior space where the entrepreneurial subject, specifically the "good refugee", is crafted, reinforcing neoliberal logics that reframe resilience as individual adaptability and innovation' (p.14). Within this context, however, social entrepreneurship can also allow refugees to create channels through which a sense of belonging and political expression is fostered. Meanwhile, Huq and Venugopal (2020) show how refugee-related policies in Australia encourage DIY entrepreneurship as a pathway to integration, emphasising its importance to resilience and self-sufficiency. Nevertheless, this entrepreneurship is often preceded by resilience, which was shaped due to the trauma of displacement, indicating how someone can be considered 'vulnerable' as defined by the state but also resilient as dictated by neoliberal ideology. Returning to the case of individuals resettled in the North East via the VPRS, in the paragraphs that follow I will show how the neoliberal logic suggests that refugees need to overcome the barriers imposed to them via the different forms of 'vulnerability' assumed by the state as discussed in chapter eight and aim to become a neoliberal subject through the entrepreneurial approach to self.

The VPRS, like most resettlement schemes, is aiming to make those arriving in their destination country independent, settled, and able to start new lives as soon as possible (Kervin and Nicholson, 2021). There are several resettlement strategies that have been proving fruitful in supporting refugees during their resettlement, significantly contributing to the treatment of traumatic stress and anxiety (Murray et al, 2010). For the VPRS, part of these resettlement strategies includes local authorities who are expected to provide resettled individuals with a caseworker who will maintain close contact with the family for the first 12 months to support their well-being and integration for which they are reimbursed using parts of the UK's overseas aid budget. For years two to five the government assists local authorities

with costs on a tariff basis depending on the needs of the individuals resettled in their remit. For example, there is an exceptional cases fund which local authorities can use to assist the most ‘vulnerable’ refugees with adjustments, for example, to homes for individuals with mobility issues (UNHCR, 2018a). Hiba described that the first house that was available for her and her family was not suitable for individuals who are disabled as they required a bungalow and bungalows were not easily available (Interview #36, 16 September 2021). As a result, small changes were made to the house that was available to make it as functional as possible until a bungalow was available from the social housing system (ibid).

As highlighted in chapter seven, participants have outlined how the local authority they have resettled in often tells them that they must do everything on their own, especially after the first year of their resettlement in the area. For older adults, this seems to be a common problem as they struggle to learn English and understand the new social and economic systems in which they must operate, which is indicative of the limits of resilience. In this instance, the limits to becoming resilient have an effect on the experience of integration of older refugees.

Within my participants’ group, some of those who embraced resilience were mothers of young adults. Fatima, when I asked at the end of our interview if there is anything else she would like to tell me that I haven’t asked, she said:

If I can send my voice to the people of the [VPRS], I really appreciate their help and support. They brought me to a safe situation and my children have an education. I wish in the future my children are part of the good people in the community. Be a doctor or an engineer. And the government can later on measure that ‘oh we bring Arabic refugees but now they are part of the community and are useful people’ and the government is proud of us (Interview #29, 19 October 2021).

A first point to note from this quote is the reappearance of gratitude in Fatima's words, when she says that she really appreciates the government's help and support. This is a further example of the internalisation of deservingness of the good refugee's mother in this case, who wishes for her children to grow and be deemed as 'useful people', by which she means responsible citizens of the UK that have adopted the entrepreneurial mindset of neoliberalism and seek education and eventually employment so that the government is proud of them. Interestingly, Fatima doesn't consider her own personal development as a way of giving back to the government. She is not invested in developing her own education or aspiring to become a doctor or an engineer herself. Her contributions of gratitude to the neoliberal state are through her role as a mother and the way she nurtures her children to become good citizens.

Existing literature has already highlighted similar stories elsewhere. Bellisle (2023) for example, discusses neoliberalism's impact on socio-cultural values of independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency in the perceptions of low-to-moderate-income single mothers towards their young adult children. Mothers in the United States foster neoliberal values of independence, responsibility and self-sufficiency in their young adult children by encouraging them to 'claim themselves' or 'file themselves' (ibid, p.6) tax returns even though eligible for EITC (earned income tax credit), a programme specifically created to fight poverty and provide direct support to low-income families with young adult children. This is because these mothers believe that to survive the neoliberal economy, their children must be 'deemed "responsible" citizens through employment and college attendance' (ibid, p.9). As outlined by Ikonen (2013), individuals need to adopt 'the entrepreneurial mindset' (p.26) - a necessary skill individuals must acquire if they seek a promising future.

The entrepreneurial mindset has also affected the way young people relate to themselves. Scharff (2016) explains that 'entrepreneurial subjects relate to themselves as if they were a business [...]. Entrepreneurial subjects compete with the self and not just with others'

(p.108). Such was the case of Omar, a young adult resettled in the North East on his own. We first discussed his English language skills as we were conducting the interview in English with no need for an interpreter. I asked Omar whether confidence played a significant role in the development of his English language skills when he came to the North East:

I am confident as a person, but at the same time I am pushing myself to be even more confident to learn English. It's my future. I can't do anything without English, so I have to. I don't have a choice. In theory I have another option, I can speak in Arabic but I try to speak mainly English; only English (Interview #31, 21 September 2021).

Omar shows a determination and competitiveness almost with his own self and abilities in English which will allow him to survive the neoliberal society in the North East of England where he has now settled. Learning English in this instance is another example of becoming resilient. Integration and learning English are interrelated, where feeling integrated can amplify the chances to learn English (Court, 2017). Moreover, supporting refugees to learn English can encourage psychological resilience (Pannu et al, 2022).

The entrepreneurial approach to self was further emphasised in our discussion around his attempts to find work:

I have family back in Syria and they want my help because [as] you know the war there is very bad. I started trying to find a job. I got [my] first job in a car wash. I thought I will learn English [the] same time I can earn some money. And it was worth it in the beginning to be honest. I earned some money but the English was very bad. They talk very bad English, only very rude English in the carwash so I had to think about something else. I got a job in a cinema but I would just work when they asked me for work. When they don't want me, they don't get me shift. This was not something for me. I want to be my own boss. I lived with an English family at this time, and they said to me 'Why don't you try to do some Arabic food

and make it as a business?’ [...]. I started talking with my mom on WhatsApp and I spent almost one month talking with my mom every day to teach me through the social media how to cook [Arabic food]. And when I was ready, I started selling my food in markets [around the North East] (Omar, Interview #31, 21 September 2021).

Omar’s need to be his own boss, to do something different with himself emphasises the entrepreneurial mindset he is immersed in. It is also worth noting here the role of social media that helped facilitate this process. Without social media Omar would have faced challenges communicating with his mother for the recipes. Diminescu (2008) notes that today’s migrants are continuously connected to their friends and families due to the digital technologies available that facilitate this. In particular, Neag and Zezulkova (2020) further find that social media can have a positive role in allowing younger refugees to stay connected with their homeland and the people left behind whilst also allowing them to develop ‘new connections, providing new support structures and processes, helping to negotiate new purpose, hope, and ambition, maintaining and developing multiple identities, and belonging to diverse cultures, and communities’ (p. 781). As a result, social media may have allowed Omar to not only stay connected with his mother who is still in Syria, but by teaching him traditional recipes, a new dimension is added to the relationship Omar has with his mother that he may not have had before when he was in Syria. This form of resilience allows Omar to find a way out of vulnerability towards integration and ultimately, citizenship.

Arguably, the English family Omar lived with at the time also played a role in encouraging the entrepreneurial mindset by suggesting that he starts a business that sells Arabic food. The English family has shown signs of hospitality by taking in Omar even though this was not a necessary part of his settlement in the North East as the VPRS explicitly offers housing to individuals resettled. When I asked Omar how he ended up staying with this English family he said that the English family was involved in one of the charities in his area specifically

providing services for refugees (Interview #31, 21 September 2021). Because he arrived at the North East without his family and was living in the housing provided by the scheme alone, the family suggested he move in with them. This way he would learn English faster but also save money as he could take low paying jobs without worrying about destitution (ibid). As exemplified also by Mahmoud in chapter seven, some younger refugees prefer to work over receiving Universal Credit (Interview #35, 4 September 2021). However, work as a newly arrived refugee in the North East means accepting work that pays less than Universal Credit. And once off benefits, individuals are expected to pay taxes. By inviting Omar to stay with them, the English family provided him with the opportunity to work and gain valuable experience that would prepare and allow him to survive the neoliberal economy. Nevertheless, this hospitality encourages the entrepreneurial mindset and exemplifies how working, instead of being on welfare are part of the resettlement aims of the neoliberal state. Whilst the way Omar described his relationship with the English family outlined how they have given him opportunities to better his life, in reality these opportunities are attempts to make him productive, ideally at a low wage and low cost, and to train him to become a ‘good’ and potentially exploitable, neoliberal subject.

A different example of the entrepreneurial approach to self from young adult participants was Fadi. Fadi didn’t aspire to immediately start work. He focused on education. Similarly to Omar, our conversation initially focused on his English language skills as we were conducting the interview in English without an interpreter. Fadi mentioned that learning English through college did not help him:

For me, [college] wasn’t helpful. They were trying to teach the grammar. [...] But for me, I thought its very slow. I need everything to be very fast. There is no time to waste. They would give something to us and say, ok do it slowly. You should learn it. I said, ok I can do it as well. But I learn better from YouTube videos. And then I was further along than what they did at

the college. I would go to the college, they would teach something and I already learnt it from the videos (Fadi, Interview #37, 20 September 2021).

Fadi's need for everything to be very fast indicates how present-day neoliberal order is contributing to a restructuring of the perception of time (Sugarman and Thrift, 2017). On the one hand, as a young refugee Fadi may feel he has wasted time waiting to start a new life and wants to get on with things. This is not an uncommon outlook for refugees. Refugee youth face the most challenges within the educational setting from the different migrant groups (Koehler and Schneider, 2019). Refugee children often face difficulties enrolling into primary education and have minimal chances for secondary education (Meda et al, 2012). As a result, it makes sense that Fadi is keen to move on with his life post resettlement. On the other hand, the entrepreneurial mindset in which Fadi has been immersed in since resettlement operates at an 'increasingly accelerated pace at which we produce, distribute, and consume goods' (ibid, p.815). Arguably, education and learning for the neoliberal subject is part of this increasingly accelerated pace which is fed by Fadi's need to move on with life. Nevertheless, in this instance, it is the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge. Sá Mello da Costa and Saraiva (2012) argue that as a society we have 'legitimised the invasion of market aspects into life' and that 'the knowledge produced in universities is regarded as a mere addition to the business routine' (p.609). Indeed, after Fadi was confident with his English language skills he described how his next steps included applying for university to get the necessary qualifications that would eventually land him a job (Interview #37, 20 September 2021). In this instance, university becomes a step to the necessary routine of becoming a neoliberal subject.

To conclude, the VPRS produces neoliberal subjects with an entrepreneurial approach to self, constantly competing with oneself to do better. This is due to the model of resettlement that VPRS has set up but also future schemes of resettlement in the UK. Schemes of refugee

resettlement such as the VPRS, have made ‘vulnerability’ an integral part of the monopoly of legitimised movement, with states like the UK using the legal category of ‘vulnerability’ to facilitate their own bordering agendas. This renders vulnerability a tool used by neoliberal governments and facilitated by intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations to tighten their border control. In the case of the VPRS, individuals are welcomed into the country but only under the criterion of ‘vulnerability’. Whilst the narrative constructed for resettlement is deeply rooted on humanitarian rules and values alongside the launch of the VPRS I showed how the consecutive Conservative governments in power at the time were also tightening individuals’ rights to seek protection (outside VPRS) in the UK, in line with a wider set of ‘hostile environment’ policies. This distinction is felt between refugees themselves who have a heightened awareness of the ‘privilege’ offered by the VPRS and feel the need to express their gratitude towards the state for offering them the opportunity to resettle in the country. This possibly exacerbates the drive for an individual to become a good refugee and ultimately a neoliberal subject who constantly competes with oneself to do better. Nevertheless, becoming a neoliberal subject is dependent on the different life stages and opportunities at those stages individuals find themselves in. Young adult refugees seem to be more clearly oriented towards this form of subjectivity due to their desires to move on with life post resettlement. This contrasts with older refugees who are struggling to become resilient and this in turn, affects their successful integration in the North East society. In the section that follows I will consider the type of citizens or non-citizens that are produced because of this process.

Vulnerability and the unequal life

Having shown the role of vulnerability in the creation of the notion of ‘good refugees’ as those with entrepreneurial instincts, I now discuss how this impacts the life of refugees. As a

bordering practice that extracts value from refugees' lives, the criterion of 'vulnerability' instantly politicises further the experience of refugeehood. As much of the literature shows, the refugee label is by definition politicised (Demetriou; 2018; Malkki, 1995a; Nyers, 2006; Torpey, 1998; Zetter, 1998; 2007). Zetter (1991) for example, states that the refugee label takes a selective, materialistic meaning through the stereotyped identities which are often translated into bureaucratically assumed needs. He also argues (2007) that the need to manage globalised processes and patterns of migration has politicised the refugee label by fragmenting it, embedding it into a wider political discourse of resistance and alienation to refugee claims. Demetriou (2018) takes this notion a step further, arguing that refugeehood 'is an essential component of the ways in which citizenship is conceptualised and structured; it provides the means for establishing, maintaining, and reproducing discrimination, both in law, and in everyday life' (p.222). Drawing from this literature, it can be argued that the criterion of 'vulnerability' becomes a part of that fragmentation of the refugee label. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, today, to be labelled as a refugee is not enough to be considered for protection, as one must also qualify under the criterion of 'vulnerability'. This exemplifies how vulnerability is politicised and used by destination countries like the UK to manage migration. Through this management of migration that begins far away from the country's borders, 'vulnerability' contributes to the 'prescribed forms of refugeehood, [under] which [the state] assumes it knows who refugees are, what they feel, from where they flee, and what they find' (Demetriou, 2018, p.219). This confirms further the suggestions of chapter eight which argues that assumptions of what vulnerability should look like shapes significantly the approaches and tendencies towards the concept from different actors. In today's management of migration flows, the prescribed forms of refugeehood are shaped by the assumptions of what vulnerability should look like. Depending on what vulnerability should look like and whether the refugee is capable of being good and entrepreneurial, they

are granted individual access to citizenship. Nevertheless, this is a citizenship that is limited. Demetriou (2018) highlights that ‘refugeehood [...] should be seen as a multiple condition of being: at once succeeding and failing, performing and knowing, submitting and resisting’ (p219). For refugees of the neoliberal order the multiple condition of being is a luxury that deprives them of their citizenship. In Isin’s (2009) words:

Citizenship is a dynamic (political, legal, social and cultural but perhaps also sexual, aesthetic and ethical) institution of domination and empowerment that governs who citizens (insiders), subjects (strangers, outsiders) and abjects (aliens) are and how these actors are to govern themselves and each other in a given body politic. Citizenship is not membership. [...] Being a citizen almost always means being more than an insider- it also means to be one who has mastered modes and forms of conduct that are appropriate to being an insider (p.371).

Going back to Chandler and Reid (2016), considering Isin’s clarification that citizenship is not membership, the citizen who has mastered the modes and forms of conduct that are appropriate to being an insider must be one who permanently struggles to accommodate oneself in the world. This is a subject that should not attempt or dream of changing the world, but a subject that accepts that as a condition to exist in this world one needs to keep fragmenting their needs and rights to cope.

The theme of politicization as a notion that orders citizenship and its lack (as in refugeehood) has a long theoretical history, from Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* (2004) to Agamben’s *Home Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), and much of critical migration studies. All these works can be read as theories of what Fassin calls ‘unequal life’ (2018, p.114). Fassin sets out to critique ‘the treatment of life and of lives, and more specifically of those vulnerable and precarious lives to which many human beings are reduced’ (p.11). He initially outlines the different forms of life explaining how different interpretations have created a

duality in the understandings of life. Acknowledging that life can be understood as ‘universal and particular (the transcendental vs. the anthropological)’; ‘biology and biography (the living vs. the lived)’; ‘law and practice (rule vs. freedom)’ (p.30) Fassin shows the importance of discussing life through these three ‘dialectical relations’ (p.36). He then discusses life from an ethical point of view bringing forth the idea of biolegitimacy: ‘the legitimacy of life, that is, the recognition of life as a supreme good in the name of which any action can ultimately be justified’ (p.53). Here, the biological and physical life is ‘before anything else [...] and often to the detriment of the social and political life’ (p.53). Finally, Fassin turns to the politics of life, focusing on the unequal treatment of human lives. Here he recognises ‘the tension between an ethics of life, which proclaims that life is sacred and therefore priceless, and a politics of life, which acknowledges the necessity of financial reparation for lives’ (p.75) highlighting the ‘moral evaluation of which lives matter, and when lost, which deserve reparation’ (ibid). Through this Fassin highlights the contradictions evident in supposedly democratic societies, which create an ‘unequal treatment of lives’ (p.94).

The use of ‘vulnerability’ via the VPRS is arguably an example of the contradictions evident in democratic societies set out by Fassin. Immigration policies in destination countries like the UK are becoming increasingly hostile to any individuals seeking protection, whilst schemes of resettlement, such as the VPRS appear more welcoming. Denying protection to those seeking refuge in the UK is a core concern of human rights and international politics as discussed by Hannah Arendt (1951; 1958) but from the refugees’ experiences, it seems that the VPRS is working towards an improvement of their experience of life. This improvement, however, is drawing lines of deservingness between those who deserve care and those who do not. Ultimately, this also draws a line between who should be considered grievable and who should not, creating limitations to solidarity. Refugees resettled via schemes such as VPRS

are considered deserving and therefore grievable, whilst anyone else arriving outside schemes of resettlement are considered undeserving of care and whose life is not worth fighting and ultimately grieving for. Inevitably, the use of ‘vulnerability’ contributes to an unequal treatment of lives and further differentiates citizenship statuses.

Acknowledging that vulnerability contributes to an unequal treatment of lives and further differentiates citizenship statuses becomes dangerous if we consider my first argument of this chapter; that ‘vulnerability’ is creating a new model for resettlement. This should make us question what happens in a world where the only pathway for resettlement will always inevitably contribute to an unequal treatment of lives and a differentiation of citizenship statuses. Perhaps a formal framework of protection for refugees that prioritises care over traditional justice might be able to account for the shortcomings of the current approaches. I am not suggesting that a state should care for everyone at the same level regardless of their status and situation, as this would be an unrealistic approach. Nevertheless, the current policies created on refugee protection and the use of ‘vulnerability’ through them are problematic because they encourage a sense of justice based on rigid and universal rules that are highly dependent on mutual advantage, setting aside care and the empathy, and context-specific moral responsibility that comes with it. This also affects solidarity, which stops being a ‘relational practic[e]’ (Jennings, 2018) that is lived and embodied and instead, is abstract and symbolic (ibid). This practice of solidarity can dangerously contribute to the creation of exclusion as it stops caring for the irreducible other, leading to integration practices that are even more restrictive and conditional (Fotaki, 2021) Reverberating Held’s (2005) view that care is more ethically significant than justice, if states want to continue using the term ‘vulnerability’ as a means of providing refugee protection, I suggest that policies of refugee protection based on the moral value of care rather than justice are considered, into which justice should be developed around a core of care and not the other way round as is currently

the case. This would provide a better response to vulnerability, ensuring that policies are context sensitive and account for the lived experiences of refugees rather than the procedural fairness and equal treatment under immigration law that traditional justice entails. In turn, this will provide flexibility over the fixed legal categories around immigration and the exclusion of those who do not fit into those categories.

Conclusion

This chapter returned to the concept of vulnerability itself to consider what type of subjects the VPRS produces and what traits of subjectivity the mobilisation of the term ‘vulnerability’ entails. I argued that the VPRS has enforced ‘vulnerability’ as a bordering practice which extracts value from individuals’ lives and produces the ‘good’ refugee and the neoliberal subject with the entrepreneurial approach to self who treats themselves as a business. The ‘good’ refugee is an individual who has been resettled to a destination country like the UK and has been supported in their integration to become a successful immigrant and ultimately a successful citizen who can conform to the neoliberal incentives and drivers that shape society and convey messages over what ‘success’ looks like. This links to the second section of this chapter which outlines how young refugee adults in the North East have been aspiring to become neoliberal subjects. The neoliberal subject has an entrepreneurial approach to self, constantly competing with oneself to do better. Finally, the chapter examines the impact ‘vulnerability’ as a bordering practice has on the lives of refugees. Following Isin’s theorization that citizenship is not membership, the citizen who becomes an insider must be one who permanently struggles to accommodate oneself to the world. This is a subject that should not attempt or dream of changing the world, but a subject that accepts that as a condition to exist in this world one needs to keep fragmenting their needs and rights in order to cope. Drawing from Fassin (2018) it has been also argued that the VPRS is an example of

the contradictions evident in supposedly democratic societies such as the UK. On the one hand the VPRS seems to be working towards an improvement of the lives of resettled refugees. On the other hand, this improvement is drawing lines of deservingness between those who deserve care and whose lives and situations are ultimately grievable, and those who do not. Inevitably, this has led to an overall unequal treatment of lives. Moreover, the practice of 'vulnerability' in the North East of England has exposed what Fassin describes as a duality in life between the moral and the political contradictions that shape human experience. This duality applies to the concept of vulnerability as well.

Chapter 10-Conclusion

In recent years, there has been a global move from states to render resettlement the main option for managing forced displacement, increasingly in exclusion of all other alternatives. A growing number of resettlement schemes have materialized in destination countries of the Global North whilst asylum protection is increasingly restricted and far right anti-immigrant sentiments are on the rise. The UK has been at the forefront of this trend with the VPRS and for this reason it is vital to understand the development of this response to forced migration in its current form and in the future. This project set out to do so by exploring the relationship between resettlement, austerity and the concept of vulnerability in the North East of England as a way to understand the development of resettlement at the nexus of refugee movements and economic crisis. It has done so by asking the following questions:

- (1) How is the term ‘vulnerability’ used in the practice of refugee resettlement?
- (2) How is the concept of vulnerability interpreted by the actors that constitute the VPRS in the North East of England?
- (3) How does austerity impact the resettlement of those framed as ‘vulnerable’?

While answering these questions I have made three main arguments:

The first argument aimed to offer a critical analysis of how the concept of vulnerability is understood and interpreted in formal approaches and international policy documents and what the implications of these interpretations are. It showed how the term ‘vulnerability’ has been embedded into the legal categorisation of refugee resettlement, becoming an integral part to the conceptual separation between individuals worthy of protection and those who are not.

The second argument aimed to contribute to the theory of migration politics by exploring the political relevance of ‘vulnerability’ in the implementation of resettlement within regions hit by austerity. Here, I explored vulnerability as a resource and the intersection between austerity and resettlement across the North East, explaining how austerity infrastructure was utilised by local authorities and the VCS community to implement the VPRS in more and less effective ways. Looking more closely at the successes and failures of this implementation, I also found that all actors, including refugees, operationalise a neoliberal approach to such implementation. I thus argued that in the context of resettlement schemes such as the VPRS individuals placed in austerity-stricken areas like the North East are expected to overcome the barriers imposed on them via the different forms of vulnerability assumed by the state and become independent, settled and able to start new lives as soon as possible. In this conceptual frame, the ‘vulnerable’ refugee will eventually integrate into the host community and become transformed into a citizen. These aspirations point to the espousal of a neoliberal subjectivity whereby the individual is entrepreneurial and constantly competes with oneself and others to do better, all towards an eventual goal of citizenship from which the refugee condition is excluded.

Lastly, my third argument aimed at contributing methodologically to the study of vulnerability. In studying the conditions that produce vulnerability in these ways, I have thus also shown that when conducting research with groups of people framed as ‘vulnerable’ in normative ethical review processes and institutional frameworks, it is vital that researchers are attuned to the need to develop situated judgments of ethical practice and responsibility in situ. Critically, this may mean questioning or challenging existing ethical guidelines to prioritise the community they are interacting with and to build and sustain ethical research relationships.

Findings and Arguments

The introduction outlined the objectives of the research and briefly summarized the thesis structure, argument and contribution. The first three chapters presented the background of my research. In chapter two I discussed the most relevant theories on vulnerability and its relation to refugees and displacement. I first traced the categorisation of refugees and explored how ‘vulnerability’ became a legal category that distinguishes between people who deserve protection and those who do not. I then considered vulnerability through the theorisation of grievability and care, enabling me to engage with ‘vulnerability’ as a category and challenge some of the assumptions attached to the concept. In chapter three I explored the formal understandings of vulnerability. I outlined how ‘vulnerability’ has been integrated and defined in international policy of refugee protection. I analysed how refugee resettlement has been increasingly relying on ‘vulnerability’ language to organise its practices. I then discussed refugee resettlement in the UK, and how it evolved alongside the shifting priorities of the international community on resettlement, identifying the significance of the VPRS within this timeline. Finally, I situated my examination of the VPRS in the North East of England, providing the context in which this was implemented. To do this, I explore the premises of neoliberal ideology and the implications of austerity at the local level that framed the implementation of the scheme in the North East. In chapter four I discussed the methodology used in the project, research for which took place in 2020-2021, during the global COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns effected as a result. I unpacked two of my key experiences whilst preparing for and being in the field researching vulnerability. First, the fact that I had to abandon my original plans and plan for a remote approach because of the pandemic, whilst an inexperienced researcher. Second, the tension when applying ethical guidelines on adults framed as ‘vulnerable’ in practice. I explained that undertaking fieldwork remotely was the most appropriate approach to undertake research during the pandemic,

however, the mitigation of risks was exacerbated in the remote approach. Firstly, because I ended up doing much more recording than originally envisioned and adopting an interview focus rather than an ethnographic focus in my approach. Secondly, because I had to continue with the remote approach even if governmental guidelines, i.e., guidelines outside of the university, were relaxing. I emphasized the tension between ethical guidelines and applying them in practice. Whilst ethical guidelines are invaluable when preparing to enter a field, their application can be challenging, particularly when working with ‘vulnerable groups’ remotely. These explorations allowed me to contextualise the findings that I then presented in the second part of the thesis.

Following from this, Part II introduced the three actors situated in the North East of England and discussed their roles within the region in relation to the VPRS: local government, VCS, and resettled refugees. This analysis helped me address Question one, on the use of ‘vulnerability’ in the practice of refugee resettlement. Chapter five introduced the local government framing them within the context of austerity and hostility. I have found that within the same region, local authorities have different experiences and approaches to their participation as hosts of the VPRS. This is due to three reasons. The first is the diverse landscape of experience local government can have with the UK refugee system, which is influenced significantly by austerity and the hostile environment encouraged by central government. The second is the timing of the VPRS: of importance here is the fact that even though the scheme was introduced at a time when austerity targeted the most marginal groups in society, local authorities were quite responsive to the call. I have shown that this may be due to the coexistence of austerity and solidarity. The third is the flexibility provided by central government to the use of VPRS funding and the ability for individual local authorities to use as they think best. Chapter six presented the VCS in relation to the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe and its aftermath. Drawing from the background I provided in chapter three about the

alleged ‘refugee crisis’ and the VCS in the UK filling in the gaps of welfare state provision, I showed the responses from the VCS in the North East of England. I explored how the limited pre-existing infrastructure in the North East survived the 2008 neoliberal austerity cuts by establishing partnerships and how the growing demand of services from the increasing number of people in the region led to the founding of new charities, whilst the church redirected its aims. The most prominent forms of solidarity in the context of the VCS in the North East, are civic solidarity and institutional solidarity, which co-existed in different extents across the three VCS groups operating in the region and were significantly shaped by VPRS. Through these observations I also noted that civic solidarity is not one directional and that the VCS can initiate the process of local authority participation. In chapter seven I explored the experiences of refugees through their narratives of the process of resettlement through the VPRS in the North East of England. This chapter showed the importance of listening to lived experience when doing research related to refugee studies. The narratives I presented in this chapter described successively families’ feelings from arrival, their experiences of housing provision, learning English and family reunification. They showed that experiences through all these stages vary widely, and that the perception of resettlement aligns in some respects but also diverges in others, with the perceptions of local authority and VCS actors about the effectiveness and challenges in the implementation of the scheme. The presentation of actors’ perceptions in this second part of the thesis then allowed me to engage in further analysis of the political importance of vulnerability in the context of the VPRS.

Part III thus analysed Questions two and three, on actors’ interpretations of vulnerability and on the impact of austerity on the resettlement of refugees deemed ‘vulnerable’ respectively. In chapter eight I focused on Question two and outlined the various understandings of vulnerability I encountered through my discussions with the three groups of actors my research focused on. My interviews revealed three main understandings. The first concerned

the vulnerabilities that rendered refugees eligible for resettlement to the UK as per the UNHCR ‘vulnerability’ criteria. These criteria were those that local authorities applied in dispensing services to the refugees. The second concerned the vulnerabilities refugees faced in their host countries pre-resettlement. These vulnerabilities were added onto those ‘primary vulnerabilities’, creating additional needs in resettlement, which all actors also largely acknowledged. The third concerned the vulnerabilities refugees face post-resettlement as they integrate in the North East of England. These vulnerabilities are oftentimes quite different to the ‘vulnerabilities’ that elicited their inclusion in the VPRS in the first place and present specific challenges to the implementation of the VPRS. Thus, these three forms of vulnerability have different registers and implications. They are registered as indications of refugeehood by international bodies and national authorities in the first instance, national and local authorities in the second, but are often ignored in the third. This means that although VPRS addresses primary protection needs, it sets refugees in a trajectory where exclusion often accompanies the experience of resettlement. Chapter nine developed this analysis further and considered my third research question more closely, regarding the impact of resettlement of those framed as ‘vulnerable’. To do this, I revisited the concept of vulnerability to consider what type of subjects the VPRS produces and what traits of subjectivity this mobilisation of ‘vulnerability’ entails. I argued that the VPRS has enforced ‘vulnerability’ as a bordering practice which extracts value from refugees’ lives and produces the ‘good refugee’ and ultimately, the neoliberal subject. I then showed how young refugee adults in the North East have been aspiring to become neoliberal subjects in this context.

Building on these findings and arguments, I aim for this thesis to contribute to the study of refugees and migration in three ways: on the level of practice, on the level of analysis, and on the level of method.

Policy Contributions: ‘Vulnerability’ as a Category

A first argument this thesis made is that over the last decade, ‘vulnerability’ has become an increasingly important part of the categorisation of refugees with important implications for practices of support, accommodation, integration and settlement, through the way ‘vulnerability’ is used in the practice of refugee resettlement. In chapter two I discussed how ‘vulnerability’ as a legal category has been subtly developed into various areas of governance the last few years (Brown 2017), with literature concerned about how ‘vulnerability’ as a legal category is used to intervene in individuals’ lives, often creating dichotomous representations of individuals as either ‘victims’ or a ‘threat’ (Dunn et al, 2008; Fawcett, 2009). I discussed the politics of being a refugee and highlighted how cultural expectations on refugees encourage images of silence, passivity and victimhood as ‘authentic’ refugeehood which render refugees deserving of the right of movement (Nyers, 2006). I also underlined how cultural expectations of qualities demonstrative of ‘authentic’ refugeehood are closely related to state assumptions around integration which is often measured within a restrictive timeline. Through this thesis I hope to have contributed to this literature but also to our understanding of policy around refugee resettlement by showing that ‘vulnerability’ as a criterion of resettlement for schemes such as the VPRS has been added to the expectation of this ‘authentic’ refugeehood which deems individuals worthy of protection. This is discussed most extensively in chapter eight where I explored the various understandings of vulnerability I encountered through my discussions with local government, the VCS and resettled refugees in the region.

The ‘vulnerabilities’ listed by UNHCR that render refugees eligible for resettlement to the UK can be summarised as legal and physical protection needs; survivors of torture or violence; medical needs; women and girls at risk; family reunification; children and

adolescents at risk; lack of foreseeable alternative durable solutions. These are the formalised understandings of vulnerability that local authorities needed to work with when they first started setting up the logistics of the VPRS but also when they prepared to welcome a family. These also feed the ‘old-fashioned’ understandings of being a ‘refugee’, which the VCS must work with when they apply for funding or communicate with the public on the work that they do. Significantly, when refugees attempted to set out a more general understanding of vulnerability, separate from their direct experiences, it is these understandings of ‘vulnerability’ that are reflected in their words. Nevertheless, looking at a deeper level at the way vulnerability appears in the everyday practices and experiences of different actors within the VPRS, three different understandings of vulnerability are evident. First, there are the vulnerabilities that deemed refugees eligible for resettlement to the UK as per the UNHCR ‘vulnerability’ criteria which contribute to the understanding of ‘authentic’ refugeehood. Second, the vulnerabilities refugees faced in their host third countries pre-resettlement which are often neglected in the conversations of refugee ‘vulnerability’, and third, the integration-oriented vulnerabilities refugees face after resettlement as they integrate in the North East of England.

Through tracing this trajectory, the thesis has found that the term ‘vulnerability’ has been embedded into the legal categorisation of refugee resettlement, becoming an integral part to the conceptual separation between individuals worthy of protection and those who are not. On the level of policy practice then, the contribution that the thesis aims at are the participants’ suggestions I mentioned in chapter seven, regarding what in specific could be improved in the implementation of the VPRS which can be applied also to similar variations of schemes of resettlement:

- On arrival: the government could work on ‘a tax-free scheme’ for the first few years following resettlement so that refugees would pursue work until they are better settled

and financially ready to contribute to the taxation system. (suggestion made by Mahmoud, Interview #35, 4 September 2021).

- On incidents of violence and harassment: schools could organise cultural exchanges where resettled refugees study. This will better educate schoolteachers about Arabic culture (or any other relevant culture) if a resettled child attends their school so that they are better equipped to support the children if they encounter incidents of violence and harassment (suggestion made by Fatima, Interview #29, 19 October 2021).
- On the efficiency of local authority support: local authorities who enacted the VPRS could incorporate on a full-time basis Arabic speaking staff within their teams for more efficient support. To make this relevant to the broader application of resettlement outside VPRS, the local authority could monitor the language needs of the refugees resettled within their remit and adjust their staff accordingly. This way if families have an urgent need, they do not need to wait for an interpreter to arrive (suggestion made by Wajiha, Interview #39, 22 October 2021).
- On learning English: a more strategic approach to learning English should be organised across regions that would allow local authorities to exchange resources, share infrastructure and experiences of good practice. This approach should focus on providing families with a more intensive English language course on arrival that would allow them to learn the language faster. This will help them find a job and start earning money faster rather than depend on the Universal Credit provided by the government (suggestion made by Wajiha, Interview #39, 22 October 2021).
- On family reunification: the process of family reunification should be better communicated to individuals who are to be resettled in the UK so that they know what to expect if they want to bring a family member to the UK after they are

resettled (suggestion made by Iqra and Aziz, Interview #38, 19 November 2021; Halima, Interview #30, 20 September 2021).

All these suggestions amount to an expansion of the interpretation of vulnerability in policy terms to acknowledge and encompass all facets of vulnerability throughout the resettlement journey.

Theoretical Contributions: Vulnerability as a Concept

In this thesis I challenged the ways we comprehend vulnerability and examined understandings beyond the institutional standardisation and expected characteristics that are attached to the legal categorisation of ‘vulnerability’. In this regard, I hope to make two main contributions to the conceptualisation of vulnerability.

First, I argued that the way we understand vulnerability is connected to the precarity communities are exposed to because of austerity. In chapter two I outlined that precarity describes and analyses the socioeconomic and sociopolitical aspects of labour and life under neoliberal modernity (Lemke, 2016). Neoliberalism has created ‘a new dangerous class’ (Standing, 2011, p.1), the ‘precariat’ (ibid), who occupies ‘an inferior position and is more likely to find him-or herself in a materially or psychologically vulnerable situation’ (Lemke, 2016, p. 14) due to ‘economies of abandonment’ (Povinelli, 2011, p.186) that austerity encourages. Within this environment it is also expected for the individual to become a ‘resilient subject’ (Chandler, 2016, p.15) that has the capacity to adapt to change (ibid). It is this context that the ‘vulnerable’ refugees of the VPRS faced when they arrived in the North East of England. As I noted in the opening of this thesis drawing from the storyline of the film the ‘Old Oak’, the communities in the North East are exposed to precarity due to the austerity they have been experiencing the last decade and more. As a result, the arrival of ‘vulnerable’ refugees intersecting with an existing vulnerable population, leads to tensions within the community. For example, in chapter six Emma’s account, underlined how resettled

families were hesitant to let their children play in their neighbourhood's park because of a previous incident of racial abuse where one of the girls had their headscarves pulled off from one of the local boys.

In the background of these tensions, I show that in the context of resettlement schemes such as the VPRS individuals are expected to overcome the barriers imposed to them via the different forms of 'vulnerability' assumed by the state with the aim to become a neoliberal subject through the entrepreneurial approach to self. I exemplified this approach with two cases: a mother and two young adults. Through Fatima's narrative, who wished for her children to grow and be deemed 'useful people', I dwelled on the meaning of such 'usefulness': responsible citizens of the UK that adopt the entrepreneurial mindset of neoliberalism and seek education and eventually employment so that the government is proud of them. Interestingly, Fatima doesn't consider her own personal development as a way of giving back to the government and is not invested in developing her own education. Her contributions to the neoliberal state are through her role as a mother and the way she nurtures her children to become good citizens. This also shows how the governmentality of implementing the VPRS emphasises the relations between citizens and states rather than amongst communities.

Secondly, through the experiences of Omar and Fadi, I showed the different variations of being a neoliberal subject. Omar showed a determination and competitiveness with his own self and abilities in English to survive the neoliberal society in the North East of England where he is now settled. Learning English in this instance, is an example of becoming resilient. His entrepreneurial approach to self was further emphasised in our discussion around his attempts to find work. Omar wanted to be his own boss, to do something different with himself emphasising the entrepreneurial mindset he is immersed in. Fadi on the other hand, exemplified determination and competitiveness through education. Exploring the

entrepreneurial approach to the self from a different angle, Fadi's experiences indicate how young adults resettled in the UK have an urge to learn and gain knowledge at a fast pace and emphasises how universities are part of the entrepreneurial journey of the neoliberal subject.

A second area this thesis hopes to contribute to through these arguments is the study of citizenship. Through drawing out the relations between vulnerability and the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion from citizenship, I have developed an analysis of how the use of 'vulnerability' in resettlement schemes like the VPRS can exacerbate an unequal treatment of lives. I showed that 'vulnerability' becomes a part of the fragmentation of the refugee label. Today, to be labelled as a refugee is not enough to be considered for protection, as you must also qualify under the criterion of 'vulnerability'. This exemplifies how vulnerability is politicised and used by destination countries like the UK to manage the patterns of migration seeking to cross their border. Through this management of the border, the criterion of 'vulnerability' contributes to the 'prescribed forms of refugeehood, which [whereby knowledge is assumed about] ... who refugees are, what they feel, from where they flee, and what they find' (Demetriou, 2018, p.219). In today's management of migration flows, the prescribed forms of refugeehood are shaped by the assumptions of what vulnerability should look like. Depending on what vulnerability should look like, the individual is granted access to citizenship, if there are capable of being good refugee that can become entrepreneurial and independent. Drawing from Fassin (2018) I also argued that the VPRS is an example of the contradictions evident in supposedly democratic societies such as the UK. On the one hand the VPRS seems to be working towards an improvement of the lives of resettled refugees. On the other hand, this improvement is drawing lines of deservingness between those who deserve reparation and those who don't. Inevitably, this has led to an overall unequal treatment of lives (e.g. between those of 'vulnerable' refugees, other refugees, and migrants in general). On a theoretical level, I argue in this thesis that policies of refugee protection that

prioritise care instead of justice might be able to account for the shortcomings of current approaches. The specific suggestions on VPRS improvement I underlined in the section above on policy contributions can all be thought of as ways of prioritising care instead of need which should eventually extend far more widely.

Methodological Contributions: Researching Vulnerability

As I engaged with critical discussions of vulnerability, I saw that similar understandings also apply to research policies and not just governmental ones. A final contribution I hope this thesis has been able to make is to highlight the particularities from an ethical point of view when conducting research with groups of people framed as ‘vulnerable’. I developed this in chapter four, where I discussed aspects of my experience attempting to research vulnerability in the field during the pandemic; a time when many people, not only from refugee backgrounds, were reassessing their own sense of embodied vulnerability and feelings of insecurity because of the pandemic. I tackled this by, first, outlining how I navigated fieldwork during the pandemic and how I had to adapt my original plans for in-person research and plan for a remote approach instead. I then discussed ethical guidelines I had to follow to conduct research specific to adults framed as ‘vulnerable’ and the challenges I identified when attempting to apply some of these guidelines in the field.

I argued that ethical guidelines are useful when planning but should not be considered as entirely fixed when applied in practice. Researchers who genuinely want to consider ethical values such as equality, partnership, and autonomy in their projects, need to listen closely to the participants and prioritize their needs over formal sets of ethical guidelines. Refugee families like those resettled in the North East may not understand informed consent the way researchers in academic settings are trained to comprehend it; in fact, if I am to judge from my participant pool, researchers undertaking fieldwork for the first time, should be prepared

for the possibility that academic documents around informed consent are likely to be comprehensible only to the academically trained. The traditionally defined concept of informed and voluntary consent promoted by universities involves culturally bound, western values of individual autonomy, self-determination, and freedom which does not necessarily align with meaningful interview practices with the resettled community in the North East. It is also often worded in a language that can be inaccessible or alienating to many of the communities we work with outside the university. It is therefore important to redefine informed consent in a way that would reflect the values and understandings of the communities researchers are interacting with.

With vulnerability becoming an increasing topic of concern both in policy but also in wider research, through this approach the thesis has shown that wider research about vulnerability requires further consideration and discussion. This entails also rethinking ethical frameworks in a vigorous but also reactive response to the communities the research is about.

The VPRS- reimagining refugeehood

This thesis was developed during a period of intense state experimentation with bordering practices, not only in the UK but globally, in the name of evolving migration challenges. In this context, the VPRS appeared as a vital case study that reflected the broader and ongoing shifts in how refugee mobility is regulated and managed. It has shown how ‘vulnerability’ has been embedded into legal frameworks and administrative practices, through which notions of who is deserving of protection, were reshaped. Moreover, the VPRS has provided clarity on the direction of state-led refugee mobility strategies looking ahead, especially as asylum protection is increasingly restricted and far right anti-immigrant sentiments are on the rise. I hope that this research has shed some light on how ‘vulnerability’ is institutionalized to

prioritise certain individuals across the border over others, providing necessary knowledge for the future of mobility governance and the impact this would have on refugeehood.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Sample codes within code groups for local authorities

Code group	Codes
Navigating austerity	- ‘keeping the balance’ when assigning social housing to resettled refugees. -inability to maintain infrastructure to support refugees/asylum seekers. -clashes with colleagues from VCS working with asylum seekers in the area.
Local authorities as ‘trailblazers’	-approached by NEMP in 2015 to be ‘trailblazers’ for the VPRS. -had existing infrastructure to draw from to set up VPRS in six weeks. -shadowed by other local authorities with less/no experience in refugee provision.
Local authorities with no previous experience of refugee provision	-setup of a specific team for the operation of VPRS. - ‘came at it completely fresh’ -initial hesitancy to participate in VPRS
Local authorities with some experience of refugee provision/ limited infrastructure	-limited pre-existing infrastructure from experience with Asylum Dispersal System. -reliance on existing teams within the council for the operation of VPRS. -setting up ESOL classes from scratch.
Understandings of vulnerability	-they had to work with ‘generalistic vulnerabilities’ to set up the VPRS - exercising discretion in tackling integration-oriented vulnerabilities not assumed by the state

Appendix B. Sample codes within code groups for the VCS

Code group	Codes
Pre-existing charities	-NERS, WERS and the Red Cross operating in the region prior to 2015 were forced due to austerity to form a partnership. -set up in the spirit of a VCS stepping in before 2015. - evidence of civic solidarity and solidarity between charities themselves
New charities	-new charities founded after 2015 in response to the “refugee crisis” in Europe. -Northumberland County of Sanctuary: civic solidarity initiatives -Darlington Assistance for Refugees: initiated to outsource support for Darlington Council; evidence that solidarity is not one directional.
The church	-civic solidarity responses not organised at start -role of churches strengthens via partnership offered by Durham County Council -shift in direction of aims
Understandings of vulnerability	-open and nebulous understanding compared to local authorities -understanding is rooted in neoliberalism -mental health and limited language skills

Appendix C. Sample codes within code groups for resettled refugees

Code group	Codes
Arrival	-boarding a plane from Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq or Egypt -feeling safe -feelings of sadness and happiness
Housing provision	-positive references to support workers -experiencing difficulties with alternative housing if families required to leave house given to them by VPRS -challenges with the social housing system
Learning English	-priority after arrival -different set ups depending on local authority infrastructure -challenges for refugees with a different level of English than most
Family reunification	-resettlement near adult family members -older couples facing challenges of reunification with adult children -better communication from VPRS on reunification
The final phases of the scheme	-overall adequately positive comments -comparisons with resettlement outside North East -challenges of integration due to covid-19
Understandings of vulnerability	-multifaceted -comparisons between pre and post resettlement -more vulnerable in host countries
An entrepreneurial approach to self	-appreciation of help and support -aspirations for independence -make the government proud

Appendix D. Consent form used with VCS and local authority participants



Consent Form

Project title: Resettlement, austerity and the concept of vulnerability in the North East of England.

Researcher(s): Georgia Dimitriou

Department: School of Government and International Affairs

Contact details: georgia.dimitriou@durham.ac.uk

Supervisor name: Dr Olga Dimitriou; Dr Jonathan Darling

Supervisor contact details: olga.dimitriou@durham.ac.uk ;
jonathan.m.darling@durham.ac.uk

Name:

This form is to confirm that you understand what the purposes of the project, what is involved and that you are happy to take part. Please initial each box to indicate your agreement:

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 29/09/2020 and the privacy notice for the above project.	
I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.	
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I agree to take part in the above project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	
I understand that anonymised (i.e. not identifiable) versions of my data may be archived and shared with others for legitimate research purposes.	

I consent to being audio recorded and understand how recordings will be used in research outputs.	
I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, and other research outputs.	
I understand that my real name will not be used in the above, unless I expressly request so.	
I would like my real name to be used in the above.	

Participant's Signature_____ Date_____ (NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS)_____ Researcher's Signature_____ Date_____ (NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS)_____
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Appendix E. Participant Information Sheet used with VCS and local authority participants



Participant Information Sheet (29/09/2020)

Project title: Resettlement, austerity and the concept of vulnerability in the North East of England.

Researcher: Georgia Dimitriou

Department: School of Government and International Affairs

Contact details: georgia.dimitriou@durham.ac.uk

Supervisor names: Dr Olga Dimitriou; Dr Jonathan Darling

Supervisor contact details: olga.dimitriou@durham.ac.uk;
jonathan.m.darling@durham.ac.uk

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my PhD at Durham University. This study has received ethical approval from the School of Government and International Affairs ethics committee of Durham University.

Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

Local authorities across the UK faced a number of governmental austerity measures, since the 2008 financial crisis. With demands on European models of refugee resettlement growing, understanding how resettlement operates at a local level is essential. This project critically examines the significance of refugee resettlement to the North East of England (NE), which has been at the forefront of governmental austerity measures. It does so by exploring the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS).

The study's purpose is to critically examine the use and scope of vulnerability as a concept in both refugee and migration studies, and in refugee resettlement in the NE. It also aims to offer fresh insight into the potentials and limits of VPRS in the NE in a way that will contribute to the support and bettering of the everyday living experience of the VPRS community residing in the NE. This study is funded by the A.G. Leventis Foundation and it will be completed in October 2022.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited because you are affected by the scheme or are a humanitarian worker/ policy-practitioner/volunteer/activist that has experience with the practice of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme in the North East of England.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation is voluntary, and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you will be asked to verbally agree to a consent form while a recorder is running. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving reason and without detriment to yourself. The research is entirely independent of any refugee organisation, local authority or charity and as such your decision to participate will have no bearing on any of these potential services and agencies. Your decision to participate or not will not be communicated to any outside agency, organisation or local authority.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you agree to take part in the study, you will have a conversation with me, based on a series of questions during a 45- minute session via Zoom. You can omit any questions you do not wish to answer.

Will my data be kept confidential?

All information obtained during the study will be held securely and strictly confidential to me. If the data is published it will be entirely anonymous and will not be identifiable as yours. If direct quotes will be required to be published, permission will be obtained first. Full details are included in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

What will happen to the results of the project?

The study in which you are invited to participate will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. From the research, papers will be produced for academic journals and I expect the results to be published after October 2023.

In line with the project's purpose to contribute to the support and bettering of the everyday living experience of the VPRS community residing in the NE, I have also collaborated with the Regional Refugee Forum North East (RRF) to use this project's findings to produce a video podcast/report that offers fresh insight into the potentials and limits of VPRS in the NE. RRF is an independent and regional organisation in the NE whose core objective is to promote hearing of the 'Authentic Collective Voice' of the region's refugee and asylum seeker community. The video podcast/report will be shared on the Regional Refugee Forum North East's (RRF) platform at the

following link: <https://www.refugeevoices.org.uk/index.php/voice/>. I will also introduce these findings at a regional event, organised by the RRF in 2021, whose aim is to offer fresh insight to local authorities in the NE on the potential of agency and the value of empowerment for settlement and integration of the VPRS community. I also expect to highlight research findings in project outputs such as conferences or short articles written for the local and national press.

No identifiable data is to be used in outputs, archived or shared. All research data and records needed to validate the research findings will be stored for 10 years after publication of the results. Durham University is committed to sharing the results of its world-class research for public benefit. As part of this commitment the University has established an online repository for all Durham University Higher Degree theses which provides access to the full text of freely available theses.

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?

If you have any further questions and concerns about this study, or would like to suggest an additional platform which could contribute to the support and bettering of the everyday living experience of the VPRS community residing in the NE, if I share my findings with them, please speak to me or any of my supervisors. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's [Complaints Process](#).

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

Appendix F. Privacy notice used with VCS and local authority participants

Privacy Notice



PART 1 – GENERIC PRIVACY NOTICE

Durham University has a responsibility under data protection legislation to provide individuals with information about how we process their personal data. We do this in a number of ways, one of which is the publication of privacy notices. Organisations variously call them a privacy statement, a fair processing notice or a privacy policy.

To ensure that we process your personal data fairly and lawfully we are required to inform you:

- Why we collect your data
- How it will be used
- Who it will be shared with
-

We will also explain what rights you have to control how we use your information and how to inform us about your wishes. Durham University will make the Privacy Notice available via the website and at the point we request personal data.

Our privacy notices comprise two parts – a generic part (ie common to all of our privacy notices) and a part tailored to the specific processing activity being undertaken.

Data Controller

The Data Controller is Durham University. If you would like more information about how the University uses your personal data, please see the University's [Information Governance webpages](#) or contact Information Governance Unit:

Telephone: (0191 33) 46246 or 46103

E-mail: information.governance@durham.ac.uk

Information Governance Unit also coordinate response to individuals asserting their rights under the legislation. Please contact the Unit in the first instance.

Data Protection Officer

The Data Protection Officer is responsible for advising the University on compliance with Data Protection legislation and monitoring its performance against it. If you have any concerns regarding the way in which the University is processing your personal data, please contact the Data Protection Officer:

Jennifer Sewel

University Secretary

Telephone: (0191 33) 46144

E-mail: university.secretary@durham.ac.uk

Your rights in relation to your personal data

Privacy notices and/or consent

You have the right to be provided with information about how and why we process your personal data. Where you have the choice to determine how your personal data will be used, we will ask you for consent. Where you do not have a choice (for example, where we have a legal obligation to process the personal data), we will provide you with a privacy notice. A privacy notice is a verbal or written statement that explains how we use personal data.

Whenever you give your consent for the processing of your personal data, you receive the right to withdraw that consent at any time. Where withdrawal of consent will have an impact on the services we are able to provide, this will be explained to you, so that you can determine whether it is the right decision for you.

Accessing your personal data

You have the right to be told whether we are processing your personal data and, if so, to be given a copy of it. This is known as the right of subject access. You can find out more about this right on the University's [Subject Access Requests webpage](#).

Right to rectification

If you believe that personal data we hold about you is inaccurate, please contact us and we will investigate. You can also request that we complete any incomplete data.

Once we have determined what we are going to do, we will contact you to let you know.

Right to erasure

You can ask us to erase your personal data in any of the following circumstances:

- We no longer need the personal data for the purpose it was originally collected
- You withdraw your consent and there is no other legal basis for the processing
- You object to the processing and there are no overriding legitimate grounds for the processing
- The personal data have been unlawfully processed
- The personal data have to be erased for compliance with a legal obligation
- The personal data have been collected in relation to the offer of information society services (information society services are online services such as banking or social media sites).

Once we have determined whether we will erase the personal data, we will contact you to let you know.

Right to restriction of processing

You can ask us to restrict the processing of your personal data in the following circumstances:

- You believe that the data is inaccurate and you want us to restrict processing until we determine whether it is indeed inaccurate
- The processing is unlawful and you want us to restrict processing rather than erase it
- We no longer need the data for the purpose we originally collected it but you need it in order to establish, exercise or defend a legal claim and
- You have objected to the processing and you want us to restrict processing until we determine whether our legitimate interests in processing the data override your objection.
-

Once we have determined how we propose to restrict processing of the data, we will contact you to discuss and, where possible, agree this with you.

Retention

The University keeps personal data for as long as it is needed for the purpose for which it was originally collected. Most of these time periods are set out in the [University Records Retention Schedule](#).

Making a complaint

If you are unsatisfied with the way in which we process your personal data, we ask that you let us know so that we can try and put things right. If we are not able to resolve issues to your satisfaction, you can refer the matter to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). The ICO can be contacted at:

Information Commissioner's Office Wycliffe House Water Lane Wilmslow Cheshire SK9 5AF

Telephone: 0303 123 1113

Website: [Information Commissioner's Office](#)

PART 2 – TAILORED PRIVACY NOTICE

This section of the Privacy Notice provides you with the privacy information that you need to know before you provide personal data to the University for the particular purpose(s) stated below.

Project Title: Resettlement, austerity and the concept of vulnerability in the North East of England.

Types of data collected and held by the researcher and method of collection:

There are two types of data collected. Personal data and the data from the 45-minute conversation you will have with Miss Georgia Dimitriou. Personal data will be collected verbally at the beginning of the interview, while a recorder is running. This will include name, living area, age, and consent to use the data from the conversation that will follow. Once consent is obtained, you will have a recorded conversation (recorded as audio) with Miss Georgia Dimitriou, based on

a series of questions on your experience with the application and understanding of the Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Scheme in the North East of England.

Lawful Basis

Under data protection legislation, we need to tell you the lawful basis we are relying on to process your data. The lawful basis we are relying on is public task: the processing is necessary for an activity being carried out as part of the University's public task, which is defined as teaching, learning and research.

How data is stored:

After the interview has ended, Miss Georgia Dimitriou will pause the recording and will store it on a non-shared OneDrive, until she transcribes it. No-one will have access to these recordings except from the researcher. During transcription, Miss Georgia Dimitriou will allocate an anonymous number to your name, meaning that any data collected, or analysis made, for the use of this project, will not be connected to your name or identity. Personal data will be stored separately to the recorded conversation, on a non-shared, non-cloud location and will also be held securely and strictly confidential to Miss Georgia Dimitriou. Once the transcription is over, the recorded conversation will be erased, and anonymised collected data will be stored on a non-shared OneDrive. Meanwhile, your personal data will be stored on a non-shared, non-cloud location, up to 6 months after the interview has taken place, after which they will be erased and there will be no way for the researcher to identify you in the data collected and analysed.

How data is processed:

After the interview is over, the recorder will be stopped, and the recorded conversation will be stored on a non-shared OneDrive, until it has been transcribed by Miss Georgia Dimitriou. For the conversation to be transcribed, the recording will be entered into a database for analysis, where an anonymous number will be allocated to your name. Once the conversation is transcribed, the recorded conversation will be erased. The researcher aims to transcribe your conversation up to a week after it has taken place. Meanwhile, your personal data will be stored separately in a non-shared, non-cloud location and will remain strictly confidential to Miss Georgia Dimitriou. After six months your personal data will be erased and there will be no way of identifying you in the data collected and analysed. If direct quotes will be required to be published and data needs to be retained in an identifiable form, permission will be obtained first.

Withdrawal of data

- You can request withdrawal of your data up until 6 months after the interview takes place. After 6 months your personal data will be erased, and it will not be possible for the researcher to identify you from the total of data collected.

Who the researcher shares personal data with:

Personal data will not be shared with anyone. Anonymised collected data will be shared after the transcription, with supervisors, refugee-related discussion platforms and used for conferences, journal articles or short articles written for the local and national press. If it is necessary for any

of your personal data (e.g. living area or age) to be shared in publications or other project outputs, permission will be obtained first.

Please be aware that if you disclose information which indicates the potential for serious and immediate harm to yourself or others, the researcher may be obliged to breach confidentiality and report this to relevant authorities. This includes disclosure of child protection offences such as the physical or sexual abuse of minors, the physical abuse of vulnerable adults, money laundering, or other crimes covered by prevention of terrorism legislation. Where you disclose behaviour (by yourself or others) that is potentially illegal but does not present serious and immediate danger to others, the researcher will, where appropriate, signpost you to relevant services, but the information you provide will be kept confidential (unless you explicitly request otherwise).

How long personal data is held by the researcher:

The researcher will hold personal data for six months, after which it will be erased and impossible to identify.

How to object to the processing of your personal data for this project:

If you have any concerns regarding the processing of your data, or wish to withdraw your data from the project, contact: Dr Olga Demetriou at olga.demetriou@durham.ac.uk, or Dr Jonathan Daring at Jonathan.m.darling@durham.ac.uk.

Further information:

Dr Olga Demetriou at: olga.demetriou@durham.ac.uk, or Dr Jonathan Darling at Jonathan.m.darling@durham.ac.uk.

Appendix G. Revised project information details shared with VCS and local authority participants that I used after my conversation with the activists




Who am I?

- ✓ Georgia Dimitriou
- ✓ PhD Researcher-Durham University.

What do I research?

- ✓ 'Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme' -[North East](#) of England.

What is the purpose of the research?

- ✓ To understand the use of the word 'vulnerability' in schemes of resettlement.
- ✓ To better the everyday living experience of people resettled in the [North East](#) of England.

Why are you invited to take part?

- ✓ Because you are a humanitarian worker/ policy-practitioner/volunteer/activist who has experience with the practice of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.

Do you have to take part?

- ✓ Participation is voluntary and you do not have to agree to take part.
- ✓ If you agree, we will have a conversation based on a series of questions during a 45-minute session.
- ✓ You can omit any questions you do not wish to answer.
- ✓ Your participation will be anonymous.




What type of data will be collected?

- ✓ Personal data and conversation data.

➔ **The two will be collected separately**

What is personal data?

- ✓ your name
- ✓ your consent to audio record and use conversation data for this project's purposes.

What is conversation data?

- ✓ An audio recording of our 45-minute conversation.

What will happen during and after the interview?

- ✓ At the beginning of the interview, personal data will be collected *verbally* while a recorder is running. Personal data will be stored in a non-shared, non-cloud location. This will ensure that the conversation data cannot be traced back to you.

- ✓ At the end of the interview, I will end the recording and will store conversation data under an anonymous number on a non-shared OneDrive, until I transcribe it. Any analysis made, will not be connected to your name or identity. The voice file will be deleted after transcription.

What if I decide to withdraw my data?

- ✓ You can request withdrawal of your data up until 6 months after the interview takes place. After 6 months your personal data will be [erased](#) and I will not be able to identify you from the total data collected.

Appendix H. Debriefing Sheet used with local authority and VCS participants



Debriefing Sheet

Project title: Resettlement, austerity and the concept of vulnerability in the North East of England.

Thank you for taking part in this study. The aim of this study is to critically examine the use and scope of vulnerability as a concept in both refugee and migration studies, and in refugee resettlement in the North East (NE). It also aims to offer fresh insight into the potentials and limits of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) in the NE in a way that will contribute to the support and bettering of the everyday living experience of the VPRS community residing in the NE.

I will now store our recorded conversation on a non-shared OneDrive. Once the transcription is over, all data and analysis from our conversation will be anonymised. I will keep your personal data in a separate non-shared/non-cloud location on my private computer and it will be held securely and strictly confidential to me. In cases where your identity is required, permission will be asked first. You have the option to withdraw your data up until 6 months following the date of your interview, after which your personal data will be erased from my record and there will be no way to identify you from the total of data collected.

If you would like further information about the study or would like to know about what my findings are when all the data have been collected and analysed, then please contact me on georgia.dimitriou@durham.ac.uk.

Appendix I. Interpreter confidentiality agreement



Confidentiality Agreement

Project title: Resettlement, austerity and the concept of vulnerability in the North East of England.

Thank you for offering to undertake the role of the interpreter in this study.

The aim of this study is to critically examine the use and scope of vulnerability as a concept in both refugee and migration studies, and in refugee resettlement in the North East (NE). It also aims to offer fresh insight into the potentials and limits of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) in the NE in a way that will contribute to the support and bettering of the everyday living experience of the VPRS community residing in the NE.

Due to the focus of the project, it is highly likely that a number of the research participants will have been affected by the different forms of vulnerability I am examining for this project. To mitigate any additional vulnerabilities that may arise as a result of this project's interactions with research participants, the anonymity of research participants must be secured.

In line with Durham University's Ethics policies, the name, age, living area, consent details and discussions with research participants are confidential and must not be communicated outside the 'interview room'. By signing this document you agree to protect all information and discussions where you have acted as an interpreter and not communicate it with any outside agency, organisation or local authority.

Interpreter's Signature_____ Date_____

Researcher's Signature_____ Date_____

Appendix J. Debriefing sheet used with participants resettled via VPRS



Debriefing Sheet (communicated verbally)

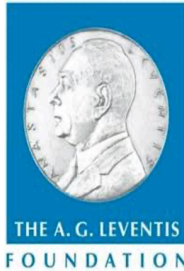
Project title: Resettlement, austerity and the concept of vulnerability in the North East of England.

Thank you for taking part in this study. The aim of this project is to understand the use of the word 'vulnerability' in schemes of resettlement and to better the everyday living experience of people resettled in the North East of England.

I have now stopped recording. The next step is to put onto paper the conversation we had by listening to the recording. I aim to do that within 7 days from today and will delete the recording after that. You will remain anonymous throughout the project and no one will be able to identify you from the outputs of the project. Only I and [enter activist or interpreter's name] will know that you spoke to me. If you decide that you want to withdraw what you said from the project, you can do that up until 6 months from today, after which I won't be able to identify what we discussed from all the information I collected.

If you would like further information about the study or would like to know about my findings when I finish this project, then please contact me on [project specific mobile number], georgia.dimitriou@durham.ac.uk, or by getting in touch with [enter interpreter's name].

Appendix K. Participant Information shared with participants resettled via VPRS (translated in English)



Who am I?

- ✓ Georgia [Dimitriou](#)
- ✓ PhD Researcher-Durham University.

What do I research?

- ✓ 'Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme' -[North East](#) of England.

What is the purpose of the research?

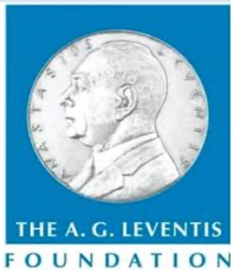
- ✓ To understand the use of the word 'vulnerability' in schemes of resettlement.
- ✓ To better the everyday living experience of people resettled in the [North East](#) of England.

Why are you invited to take part?

- ✓ Because you have been resettled in the [North East](#) of England via the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.

Do you have to take part?

- ✓ Participation is voluntary and you do not have to agree to take part.
- ✓ If you agree, we will have a conversation based on a series of questions during a 45-minute session.
- ✓ You can omit any questions you do not wish to answer.
- ✓ Your participation will be anonymous.



What are we going to discuss?

- ✓ Your experience with your first days in the [North East](#).
- ✓ If the scheme covered everything you needed to start a new life here.
- ✓ If not, what else you found useful.
- ✓ A typical day in your life before COVID-19 and what has changed since the start of the pandemic.
- ✓ How you see your future in the [North East](#).
- ✓ If you can raise issues and be listened to with respect.

How can we stay connected after today's interview?

- ✓ My [tel/email: 07521944454/ \[georgia.dimitriou@durham.ac.uk\]\(mailto:georgia.dimitriou@durham.ac.uk\)](tel:07521944454)

Appendix L. Note I submitted to the ethics committee explaining why I did not prepare a Privacy Notice for my interviews with participants resettled via the VPRS

No privacy notice will be shared with research participants. I am uploading this explanation because the system won't let me submit the ethics form without uploading a document for the privacy notice.

As mentioned in the ethics form itself, I won't be sharing a privacy notice with interviewees because after extensive discussions with the ACAs, it was emphasised that providing written explanations and consent forms are unrealistic for the community I will be interacting with, since a large proportion of the VPRS community has low literacy rates (in English, Arabic and digital), meaning that they will be unable to access/read/understand the documents sent to them via encrypted email.

I also find it unsuitable to communicate a privacy notice such as the one I sent to interviewees in Phase 1 verbally, because a privacy notice of that extent might resurface negative sentiments, memories of previous formal interview processes of asylum seeking, may trigger.

Instead, a 2-page PowerPoint will be prepared in Arabic with minimum information on myself, the project, its aims and anonymity, to confirm what the ACAs already told individuals when recruiting them. PowerPoint will be shared on ZOOM at the beginning of meeting, which interpreter (where required) will read out loud. Consent to audio record meeting and use information discussed for project outputs will then be sought verbally, via the interpreter (where interpreter is required).

Appendix M. Conversation guidance for interviews with participants resettled via VPRS

On arrival

- 1) When did you arrive in the NE?
- 2) What do you remember from your first days? (e.g. airport, house, food, city?)
- 3) What did you really like when you first came?
- 4) What did you find difficult to get used to when you first came?
- 5) Who helped you the most in your first days in the NE? (e.g. charities, the Syrian community, the council?)

On benefits

- 1) What help do you currently receive from the scheme and what do you need to do to access it? (English course?)
- 2) Does any of this help include benefits? And what did you have to do to access it? (housing benefit, universal credit, jobseeker's allowance, child benefit, disability living allowance?)
- 3) Is there more that the scheme could have offered?
- 4) Do you know if people in other areas receive different things to you and what are these?

On the everyday

- 1) Can you describe to me a normal day in your life before COVID-19?
- 2) What/who, helped you deal with the practicalities of everyday life?
- 3) When you first came, did other Syrians also come? Do you keep in touch?
- 4) Do you have friends who are Syrian/Arabic speaking here? And do they help in any way? In what way?
- 5) Does the local community support you? (e.g., friendly relations with neighbours?)
- 6) How has COVID-19 affected your routine and what adjustments did you have to make?
- 7) Did you receive any support for these adjustments?

On vulnerability

- 1) How do you understand the term vulnerability?
- 2) What does it mean to you for someone to be 'vulnerable' and a 'refugee'?

On empowerment

- 1) Are you hopeful (inspired/excited/motivated) about your future here in the NE? Do you have plans for the next months/years?
- 2) What are you the most proud of achieving since coming here?
- 3) What are the issues you would like to have had more help with, and what have you been able to do well on your own?
- 4) When you have a problem, do you have someone you can go to?

- 5) Does the council/organisations listen to your problems? Are your concerns respected?
- 6) If you have suggestions for improvement, do they take them into consideration?
- 7) How do you think the scheme should be improved for the future?
- 8) Is there anything further you would like us to discuss?
- 9) Is there someone else you think I should speak with?

Appendix N. Conversation guidance for interviews with Councillors

On the role

1. Tell me about your role as a councillor. When did you get elected in this position and what have been your responsibilities over the years?
2. How do these responsibilities intertwine with refugee resettlement in your council?

On refugee resettlement

1. How does the council decide if they can or want to host a resettlement scheme in their area? Describe to me the decision process.
2. What motivated the participation of the council to host VPRS/UK Resettlement Scheme/Afghan Resettlement Scheme?
3. What were the challenges the council faced upon their decision to host VPRS?
4. What are your impressions on the scheme's operation over the years? Do you think it now works well? If yes, in what ways?
5. What needs more improvement?

On vulnerability

1. How do you understand vulnerability?
2. If someone is a 'refugee', do they have to be vulnerable?

On austerity (depending on year in position)

I would like to talk about austerity and deprivation in the area and how that may or may not affect resettlement.

1. How has austerity affected/still affect your area?
2. What initiatives did you had to introduce to improve the effects of austerity?
3. Did VPRS (refugee resettlement) have a role in any of these initiatives?
4. Does deprivation in the area have any effect (positive and/or negative) on refugee resettlement and integration?
5. Does the pandemic have any effect (positive and/or negative) on refugee resettlement and integration?

Appendix O. Conversation guidance for interviews with VCS participants

On the charity

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your charity/organization? What does it do and what is your role in it?
2. Can you describe to me a normal day before COVID at the office? E.g. what does your meeting with the clients consist of?
3. How has COVID affected this routine/services you provide and what adjustments did you have to make?
4. Before COVID, was there anything from the services you provided to your clients that you wished was different? E.g. processes within the charity that worked differently, or councils did differently to support your clients better?

On the clients

5. How do your clients find you? Does someone recommend them to you?
6. Do councils seek to collaborate with your charity to specifically support the VPRS community?
7. Can you go into a little more detail about the profile of the clients you work with? E.g. VPRS/asylum seekers; women/men; young/old; nationalities; education; stage of integration in the UK?
8. Do different groups have different needs?
9. Are there relations between people of different schemes of settlement? E.g. Gateway with VPRS or VPRS with the asylum dispersal system?
10. Is there solidarity between the groups? E.g. are groups fighting/looking for the same cause/things?
11. If yes, is there friction between them because they are classified as being from different schemes?

On vulnerability

12. How do you understand the term vulnerability?
13. Is there anyone else you think it will be useful if I speak with?
14. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Additional questions

15. What does a client case consist of? Do you call the different agencies? Do you go with them to the ESOL class/placement?
16. When do you stop seeing clients?
17. How close are you with clients at the end?
18. Do you keep in touch after your meetings come to an end? Are you friends with your clients after they no longer need your assistance?
19. What brought you into this sector?

Appendix P. Conversation guidance for interviews with local authority workers

On the roles

1. I would like to hear a little bit about yourself first. Can you tell me about your role within the council, when did you start this role and what does this role entail?
2. Did you have to do any special training to undertake this role? For example, was there any specific training on understanding vulnerability, or working with vulnerable groups of people?
3. What other roles do people hold in the VPRS team with you? And what do these roles entail?

On the VPRS team building

1. Now that I have a fuller picture of your team at the council, I was wondering if you could tell me how everything started? Who made the decision that the council will host refugees of the VPRS?
2. How was the VPRS team put together back in 2014/2015?
3. What preparations did you have to make before you started hosting any refugees?
4. What challenges did you face with this preparation?
5. Which mechanisms already set up within the council or the voluntary sector could you rely on to support this preparation?
6. Have these mechanisms changed over the years?
7. Have you sought more collaborations with the voluntary sector later on?

On the first arrivals

1. What do you think worked well the first months refugees started arriving and what didn't?
2. How did you adjust for the parts that didn't go as planned?
3. If refugees or council workers have any issues or suggestions on the operation of the scheme, is there a way for them to let your team know?
4. What have been the biggest issues/suggestions that have come up?

On COVID

1. How did COVID affect your work?
2. What adjustments did you have to make?

On the today

1. What have you learned during all these years of scheme operation?
2. Are you happy with the way the scheme works now?

3. In the support provided to you from the government, if you could make any suggestions, are there any ways that the government could support you better in the work that you do?
4. With the scheme coming to an end, is the team planning to stay together to continue with other resettlement schemes?

On vulnerability

1. What does vulnerability mean to you and to the work that you do?

Appendix Q. Email template used to recruit VCS and local authority participants

Dear [insert name],

My name is Georgia Dimitriou and I am a 2nd year doctoral researcher at the School of Government and International Affairs at Durham University, where I research refugee resettlement and vulnerability in the North East of England.

My university profile: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/sgia/staff/profile/?id=19265>

I am contacting you because I would like to discuss with you the work you do at the [insert charity name or local authority]. [insert name] gave me your email and said that you are interested to talk to me.

Are you available for a zoom chat these coming weeks?

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes,

Georgia

Georgia Dimitriou

A.G Leventis Scholar

School of Government and International Affairs

Durham University