



fugitive arts: executive summary



*ARTS AND REFUGEES IN THE SOUTH EAST OF
ENGLAND*

*Research for Arts Council England (South East)
and Refugee Action*

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CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- The South East is where a majority of asylum seekers arrive, containing as it does the main seaports and second largest airport.
- It is difficult to assess accurately the numbers of asylum seekers and refugees in any region, including the South East. However, it is a major gateway and there are 'hotspot' areas following the introduction of new dispersal arrangements for those seeking asylum: Portsmouth/Southampton; Kent; Oxford and West of London, particularly Slough.
- Though the 'official' statistics do not show large numbers of asylum seekers, they do not reflect the numbers of refugees who are much harder to identify and count.
- The South East area has a variety of detention centres where people are held prior to removal or deportation (Dover, Oxford, Portsmouth, Crawley)
- A variety of new measures have been introduced in recent years which affect asylum seekers and those seeking to support them: NASS; 'backlog clearance'; a series of new laws which refuse support; new detention centres. The political climate is increasingly hostile to refugees.
- Definitions are important, but it is often difficult to be cut and dried. There is a difference between those seeking asylum, and those who have got refugee status, which must be understood in developing programmes. Less clear can be the point at which a 'refugee' stops being a refugee and becomes a citizen. For some, this will happen early, for others never.
- Art is and always has been powerfully inspired by notions of flight and exile.
- 'Refugee art' can mean a number of things: representation of the refugee (flight and exile) experience by other artists (not necessarily refugees); art as 'intervention' (where the refugee experience is 'processed' by art); education and awareness raising of the refugee 'issue'; art as therapy; art as entertainment.
- Some refugees choose not to identify themselves as refugees, but to align themselves with the migrant 'mainstream', for a variety of reasons.
- There are many reasons why some artists do not wish to be identified as 'refugee artists', but there are simultaneous (often funding-led) reasons why it is helpful to do so. Many artists from refugee communities would rather identify simply as artist, but find themselves propelled towards a 'refugee artist' definition if they want to achieve support and recognition, albeit small scale.

- As an illustration of this, the research did not uncover huge numbers of refugee artists – on the contrary, most people surveyed said they did not know of any. It is not currently the case that a ‘network’, or ‘directory’ of artists would be either possible or useful. This may simply be because it is too early to create these, but it may also be a function of artists not wanting to identify via what feels like a constraining label.
- There are different practical hurdles for different types of artists seeking asylum in this country: musicians, for example, face a particular difficulty in finding instruments and space to practise; visual artists need implements; writers need translators and so on.
- It is difficult for artists in general to break into the closed worlds of UK arts and ‘make it’ within the market – this is compounded by having no resources and little understanding of the systems and cultures of the new host country.

OVERVIEW OF ISSUES RAISED

- There are a wide variety of discussions, initiatives, networks which are looking, broadly, at the issues around refugees and arts. Some of these may not be based in the South East, but have relevance and applicability for those living within the area.
- Strategic and funding bodies have widely varying approaches to funding refugees and the arts. Inevitably, this is partly a corollary of numbers – where there are many, there are projects. It also reflects an absence of political commitment in some areas.
- What funding there is, is often short term, and many agencies are currently fighting for survival.
- There are a few projects within the area which could broadly be labelled ‘Arts and Refugee Projects’. These are, again, mainly grouped around the hotspot areas.
- The type of ‘Arts and Refugee’ projects around varies greatly. Some of them are by non-refugees but representing the refugee experience. Others are run by refugee community groups as a way of distracting and soothing their clients during a stressful period (detention, for example). The spectrum of projects is great.
- The number of ongoing, creative relationships between the arts and refugee sector was very small, but projects seemed to fare better when effort was put into agency to agency liaison.

- Many arts projects, not currently addressing refugee issues, would like to expand their work but don't know how to go about it and feel under-informed about the issue, and unconfident about the cultural, political and social ramifications.
- Arts projects which focus on the 'product' of art (which depend, for example, on attracting audiences in order to survive, financially) are less likely to 'take a risk' on refugee work (not perceived as a popular subject) than those arts projects which focus on community development and education.
- Refugee projects may start introducing strands of art work into their programmes often for very different reasons than arts projects – in order to enable individuals to integrate, express, preserve culture and feel better.
- Refugee agencies are often highly over-stretched, and dealing with immediately difficult and traumatising situations. This can take all their energy.
- There are significant cultural differences between the arts and refugee sectors
- The relationship of refugee art to the broader 'BME art', or culturally diverse agendas, is problematic and needs more attention and definition.
- Success of projects is dependent on: information and training; time spent creating relationships; clarity of definition (about art, about refugees, about purpose of project); creative approaches (taking art to refugees) and about choosing the art forms appropriately.
- Some art forms are more suited to the asylum seeker experience, requiring less time to set up and deliver.

CONCLUSIONS

- It is vital that the Arts Council and other funders and supporters agree on the purpose of supporting work around arts and refugees. This needs to include a definition of 'refugee artist', 'art about refugees', 'education refugee/art work', 'art as therapy', 'art as a community catalyst and communicator'.
- The place of refugees and asylum seekers in the broader BME movement needs to be clarified. Are they 'in' or 'out' (and if 'out', why?)
- Time needs to be put into brokering differences of understanding and perspective between the arts and refugee sectors. This includes training and creating directories of agencies working in the area.
- New partnerships, networks and information channels are needed. People need more information to feel comfortable working in this area, plus contacts and networks to know who to turn to and create partnerships with. Several people

spoke of the sense of ‘dispersal’ of arts projects in this area (much like the dispersed reality of asylum seekers).

- Work with asylum seekers may need to be developed separately in some instances, as they will have different needs and their ‘horizon’ is different from settled refugees
- Particular attention should be paid to developing networks around the ‘hotspot’ areas.
- Information on refugee and asylum issues needs to be disseminated to funders and supporters, not just arts agencies.

SPECIFIC ACTIONS

- The report suggests a series of specific actions for key players in the field: Arts Council; Refugee (Strategic) Agencies; Refugee Community Groups; Arts Organisations; Statutory bodies (SERASC, GOSE etc). Amongst the practical suggestions made are a support fund for individual artists and the creation of a support ‘careers’ pack which explains the arts ‘markets’ to refugee artists (an arts careers guidance leaflet, possibly complemented by 1:1 sessions with an advisor).