



Gatekeepers and community co-production as a mechanism for reaching under-served migrant and refugee groups

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Introduction

This paper describes the mechanism used by the [MigRefHealth](#) project to recruit participants from under-served migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking groups who are the focus of our study.

Co-creating asset and place-based approaches to tackling refugee and migrant health exclusion (MigRefHealth) is a 3-year UKRI and Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project aiming to generate an evidence-based conceptual framework for transdisciplinary interventions in healthcare that allow community assets¹ to be efficiently integrated, supporting accessible and effective local and regional service delivery by Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) and their key partners.

By:

- Identifying and evaluating how social determinants of health impact health outcomes for diverse refugee, asylum seeking and migrant communities living in the selected project sites.
- Developing a model which will support Integrated Care Systems, civil society agencies, local authorities and research communities to collaborate on creating and implementing co-created initiatives.
- Researching the scope for community assets to support health and wellbeing for communities.
- Co-designing models for the delivery of place-based integrated systems that tackle the wider social determinants of health
- Identifying how holistic approaches to health over the life course can be embedded within integrated health services to better tackle health inequality
- Building opportunities for wider community impact through sharing knowledge so that it can be used in other communities and other regions.

¹ A “community asset” is a service, activity or space that is an integral part of community life. It can include advice and information services, community hubs, community groups, religious organisations, parks and open spaces, food banks, leisure centres etc.

Approach and Methods

The project has co-production, community voice and stakeholder engagement embedded throughout every element of its governance, design and delivery. It uses a range of methods to drive practice focused collaborative research activities to increase both our understanding of the core concerns experienced and articulated by refugee, migrant and asylum-seeking communities and increase mechanisms for their successful social inclusion.

The research is a collaboration between academic and community partners across three regions and 12 field sites (see Figure 1). The field sites are a range of urban and rural / coastal areas across Southeast England, plus the one remaining mass accommodation centre. In South London the field sites are Lewisham and Greenwich, In North London they are Barnet and Islington, whilst in the East of England there are 2 field sites from each of the 4 counties – Colchester and Wethersfield in Essex, Cambridge and Peterborough in Cambridgeshire, Lowestoft and Ipswich in Suffolk and Great Yarmouth and Norwich in Norfolk.

Figure 1: Project Locations



In terms of governance, the project is led by a 10-member Leadership Team consisting of 5 academics and 5 community partners. The Leadership Team is supported by an Advisory Board consisting of broader research teams and community participants. There are 3 Locality Based Research Teams in East of England, North and South London comprising the academic team, community organisations, project partners and community researchers. Whilst Community Forums (CF) for people with lived experience of migration and the asylum system have been established in each of the 12 field sites, the CFs are key

in driving community and stakeholder engagement and feed into each work package (see below) to shape and inform project delivery. Twelve CF events will be held throughout the life of the project in each field site.

The project is divided into 4 transdisciplinary work packages. (See figure 2). Again, each has an academic lead, a community lead and an expert member with specialist experience. The work packages cover:

1. Governance and Framework Development
2. Social Ecology of Community Assets
3. Mobilising Community Voices
4. Place based models: Embedding system change and building capacity within institutions.

Figure 2: Project Work Packages



Work packages 2 and 3 are the project’s fieldwork phase. They consist of:

- Secondary research to scope existing literature and create field site demographic profiles
- Desk research and co-production to create an initial digital asset map
- Walking interviews carried out by trained Community Co-Researchers (CCRs)
- Six of the twelve Community Forums (CF) to gather data at each field site using a variety of qualitative and creative methods.

At the end of June 2025:

- 19 Community Co-researchers have been identified and trained
- 83 Walking Interviews have been carried out
- Community Assets used by participants have been identified from 21 workshops and 15 in-depth interviews (Wethersfield only) with 286 participants (CF2&3), and stakeholder engagement (CF1 and [an online community support form](#)) to create initial [online maps](#)
- 12 creative storytelling sessions with 122 participants have been held focusing on participant experiences of home and housing (CF4)
- Overall, 408 unique participants from 38 countries have taken part in the project.

Whilst between June-July 2025 Stakeholder engagement events (CF5) were held for each field site, presenting and discussing initial findings. Further creative sessions (CF6-8) covering the topics of food and access to services are planned between September – December 2025.

The initial recruitment challenge

The migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking groups that are the focus of our project have been described as hard to reach - a term that I personally don’t like as it sounds like these typically under-served migrant communities are being deliberately awkward rather than excluded by traditional consultation and engagement methods. Rather they are more expensive to reach in terms of time and resources.

The initial challenge our project faced in accessing these migrant populations is their ‘invisibility’ to researchers. Reasons included:

- No reliable source to identify the size and location of recent migrant populations

- Their geographic mobility due to sudden dispersal and the speed of claim processing
- Wide dispersal across the UK – particularly Hong Kongers (Rolfe and Benson, 2023)
- Mistrust and concerns about their legal status making them reluctant to self-identify
- Linguistic ability and literacy levels

Gatekeepers and community co-production

Our project used gatekeepers and community co-production as a mechanism to enable the recruitment process and overcome many of these challenges.

Further we would argue that the project's collaborative and community co-production approach resulted in potential Gatekeepers, i.e. our community partners, naturally being an integral part of the project. As previously described, co-production has been embedded into the project's design with academic teams and community organisations working in partnership alongside local stakeholders and migrant populations to co-design, collect and analyse data, create transferable models of support, promote and influence change. Community partners named as co-investigators in the bid included:

- Barnet Citizens – Citizens UK
- Cambridge Refugee Resettlement Campaign
- Local Government East
- Great Yarmouth Refugee Outreach Support (GYROS)
- Lewisham Refugee & Migrant Network
- Migration Work CIC
- The Queen's Nursing Institute

All nineteen project partners' responsibilities were agreed and set out in the funding proposal, with teams of academic and community organisations working across the 4 work packages and within each field site. For example, Great Yarmouth Refugee Outreach Support (GYROS) led on 4 field sites – Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft, Norwich and Ipswich – in partnership with an academic lead from ARU. In North London, Barnet Citizens in Barnet and Migration Works in Islington work in partnership with an academic lead from Middlesex University. In South London Creating Ground in Greenwich and Lewisham Refugee Resettlement in Lewisham work with the University of Greenwich.

Our Community Partners, as locality-based organisations working directly with migrant populations, were responsible in each field site for the administration of the project's data collection events such as the Community Forums and Walking Interviews. This included responsibility for the recruitment of Community Co-researchers (CCRs) to carry out the Walking Interviews and participants for both the interviews and Community Forum events. Community Partners were allocated ring fenced funding from the project budget to carry out these activities.

What is a gatekeeper?

In this context a gatekeeper is defined as an individual or organisation that is willing to help with the recruitment of research participants where the research team has no direct access to potential participants. (UK Research Integrity Office) This could involve passing on recruitment material within their organisations and even passing on the contact details of potential participants having gained consent to do so.

This embedded community co-production approach, with Community Partners acting as gatekeepers, has helped overcome many of the initial challenges of migrant populations 'invisibility' to researchers as they know where migrant populations are and are trusted by them. Community Partners being part of the project team also addresses some of the potential pitfalls of using gatekeepers, as their involvement means that they are well informed and motivated with a positive attitude to the research (McFadyen and Rankin, 2016). Whilst their allocated role with specific responsibility and budgets for recruitment enables greater accountability to the project. Their involvement with and knowledge of migrant populations has also reinforced the use of good research practices which encourage trust and support participation such as identifying familiar local venues for events, translation from Community Co-Researchers and providing or signposting to additional support flagged up by participants.

Further our collaborative approach resulted in several levels of gatekeepers with academic teams in North London directly working with NGOs to obtain Romanian attendees for the community forums. Our official Community Partners used their existing relationships with, and knowledge of, local networks and other community organisations working directly with migrant populations to promote the project and encourage local stakeholder engagement. Consequently, our Community Partners have also acted as facilitators of the recruitment process by using their knowledge to ask hyperlocal stakeholders to act as gatekeepers and help recruit participants for the study. And in turn these local stakeholders have identified additional community organisations and groups.

For example, in the Colchester field site the official Community Partner and Co-investigator is Local Government East. Through their existing relationships and networks, they identified several hyperlocal organisations working directly with migrants. These included Refugee, Asylum Seeker & Migrant Action (RAMA), Colchester City Council and Essex Integration. In turn RAMA identified further groups such as the Hong Kong Welcome Hub who brought along members of their communities. In Barnet and Islington field sites the CCRs recruited by our official Community Partners also brought along members of their communities.

All these layered and flexible recruitment mechanisms have enabled greater community reach and impact of the project by both widening participation and buy-in from migrant populations and local stakeholders. Thus, co-production has enabled the academic team to use their own networks and build on the existing knowledge of our community partners and their established trusted relationships with individuals and community groups to access migrant populations in the field sites.

Challenges encountered

Despite our collaborative approach and the use of gatekeepers and community co-production mechanism we still encountered a number of challenges to our recruitment of under-served migrant and refugee groups. They included:

1. Lack of control over who and how many participants turn up to CF events. Despite personal approaches by our Community Partners and other local community groups which resulted in migrants registering for an event, we still could not guarantee who would turn up on the day. For example, at Norwich CF2 some participants had to be turned away due to the large numbers turning up, but at the following CF3 no-one turned up – possibly due to the bad weather.

2. Organising and holding specific Community Forum events rather than going to where migrant populations are meant that we are potentially excluding some people due to their personal circumstances. For example, in Peterborough, following the attendance of their car-sharing husbands, we identified that several Afghan women who lived in remotely located accommodation were unable to participate due to no access to transport and their childcare responsibilities. Further, holding inclusive events can be off putting for some under-served migrant groups and sub-groups.
3. Accessing asylum seekers living in hotels and mass accommodation sites has proved problematic as generally visitors are not allowed on-site. For example, at Wethersfield Accommodation Centre only specific groups with permission are allowed on site at designated locations. This means that certain participants who don't access groups either on or off site simply cannot be reached.
4. Timing issues. There were 2 types of timing issue. First there was also an on-going issue of late arrivals at all CFs, with some participants turning up in the middle or even at the end of session times. Whilst second, CFs were typically held during weekday, working hours. However, this excluded those migrants who had long working hours, particularly those on work visas from Vietnam, Bulgaria, Sudan or Spanish speakers. They were available at evenings and weekends which clashed with the availability of the project team. In Lowestoft, the daytime CF2 was poorly attended due to this issue as many of the resident migrant communities worked in local factories.
5. Dispersal and rapid asylum claim processing. Asylum-seekers are often subject to last-minute accommodation moves, plus claim processing procedures have increased recently, making either initial or on-going participation difficult. For example, for a recent CF at the Wethersfield field site a participant registered to take part in a creative activity and then gave his apologies as he had been moved out of the site ready to receive his asylum application decision - all within the space of one week!
6. Consent processes and documentation burden. The need to demonstrate that the project is being carried out ethically and document participants' informed consent can be problematic for many migrant, refugee and especially asylum-seeking groups due to issues of mistrust of official looking documentation, fear of identification if they give their name, as well as their literacy and linguistic ability to understand what they are agreeing to. This often resulted in lengthy consent processes which cut into session times and was sometimes compounded by late arrivals.
7. Translation and interpretation issues due to language ability and the availability of CCRs who supported those with less linguistic ability. The project employed 19 CCRs, approximately 2 per field site, from the 4 main nationalities of focus speaking a range of languages. Unfortunately, despite best efforts, they were not always available, and sometimes there were participants who spoke languages not covered by either CCRs or Community Partner staff.

8. Participant views of themselves. Some participants did not view themselves as having anything in common with other migrants, even from their own community, neither viewing themselves as either under-served or even migrants. For example, some Hong Konger participants viewed themselves as British Citizens with rights, and not as a homogenous group stating that they had nothing in common with older migrants from Hong Kong, migrants from China, or those at different life stages.

“The reality is, we’re not refugees from a war zone. The reason many of us left in 2019 was because we believed in universal values—which ... align exactly with British values. ... The problem was, in Hong Kong, we were trying to preserve these values, but we couldn’t—and that’s why many of us chose to leave. And another thing—I am a British national! I was born a British national, and so were my parents. I’ve always considered myself British—my family has held British nationality for multiple generations.” **Hong Konger participant,**

9. Participants legal status and practical issues meant that it was not always possible to demonstrate the value of their contribution, and thus incentivise it, by offering financial remuneration or opportunities for personal development. Whilst using CFs as an opportunity to bring in speakers to provide information on specific services / activities that would support migrants’ personal development such as on health, employment, volunteering, libraries, ESOL providers etc was considered impractical as it turned them into day-long events.

And overcome?

Whilst we have not been able to overcome some of the recruitment challenges that we have encountered, we have found that on-going reflexive practice after events has enabled our project team to develop flexible innovative and inclusive approaches to learn from and improve collaboration and co-production across field sites.

We acknowledge that we have no control over who turns up on the day and simply cannot access hotel and accommodation centres, but we have recognised that by going to where under-served migrant populations are in the community we can reach and engage more widely with them. For example, the academic team in North London has started holding specific events for single population groups that have not engaged as yet with the project, such as Afghan women and older Italians, at familiar and well used local venues. Whilst in the East of England in Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft we have attempted to hold CF events at weekends with those working migrant groups we had not initially engaged with such as the Portuguese and Bangladeshi communities.

For those asylum seekers that we have been unable to offer financial remuneration for sharing their Lived Experience we have made donations to local groups directly supporting them. For example, in Wethersfield field site we made donations to Changing Lives, Art Refuge and Wethersfield English Conversational Classes etc. In addition, where need has been identified and budgets have allowed, we have offered further non-project creative sessions and are currently discussing holding separate information sessions between local service providers and migrant groups to educate and inform each other of their services and service delivery needs.

Further our existing project structures are over time also reducing some of the challenges faced. For example, whilst Community Forums can be accessed as stand-alone events, participants have been encouraged to attend on an on-going basis. This has established trusted

relationships between participants and the field site research team. It has also reduced the consent and documentation burden as the process allows the initial written consent given to be refreshed through verbal reminders and acquiescence. So far one fifth of participants (20%, n = 83) have attended more than one Walking Interview and / or CF.

Whilst Stakeholder organisations have been invited to be involved throughout the life of the project, and been given the opportunity to feed in at critical moments such as our recent CF5s, and be part of a deep dive into how community assets in their locality are being used, their barriers to their usage and identifying 'invisible assets' and help shape the design of models to tackle health inequalities by repurposing / developing existing assets

Ethical considerations of the methodology

There are a number of ethical issues that need to be considered when using gatekeeping and community co-production as a recruitment mechanism for under-served migrant and refugee groups.

Our collaborative approach has meant that community organisations have been involved in ensuring that ethical best practice has been built into in the project's design from the outset. They are also involved in decisions on the project's on-going ethical delivery. For example, a trauma informed approach has been used in the design of research questions with Community Partners raising issues of appropriate terminology and potentially triggering questions. Whilst go-to organisations have been identified in field sites should participants want further information or well-being support after events.

From the outset we have sought not to raise expectations of immediate system or personal change due to participation in the project. However, collaboration with our Community Partners and Stakeholders mean that we are working with organisations that can provide or signpost to further support for any identified specific issues. For example, in Islington we are assisting an Afghan woman who asked for advice about going into business. Whilst some Community Partners and Stakeholders have adapted their service delivery based on their involvement with the project. Further, as stated above, we have offered some non-project related creative sessions that enable wellbeing and are discussing the provision of information sessions to support migrants access to services.

To demonstrate the value of participants contributions, a fair and flexible financial remuneration policy in line with national guidance was agreed with Community Partners. Where it wasn't possible to offer financial remuneration to asylum seekers, those organisations directly supporting them were offered payment instead.

Our CCRs were trained by the academic team on carrying out the walking interviews which included ethical issues such as safeguarding, confidentiality, data protection and the route risk assessment. They were given certificates for training they received, paid for their time and provided with references to support future employment. Some CCRs in Barnet, Islington, Colchester and Norwich have used this experience to gain paid employment or study for a PhD.

Further consideration might be given to the relationship between the CCR and participant in which, akin to Ann Oakley's consideration when interviewing women, their similar background might unwittingly encourage 'over sharing' (Oakley, 2005). For example, in Colchester one participant said that they had told the CCR far more than they had told anyone else, including

revelations of mental health issues that they would not want made known to their community due to fear of judgement. It certainly highlights the need for rigorous enforcement of confidentiality regarding the data collected to ensure that the real risk of identification to other community members is mitigated.

The key ethical consideration is the power dynamic of trusted local organisations or even individuals (CCRs) asking individuals from those migrant communities they support to take part in research. Would they feel obliged to take part in the research out of a sense of reciprocity or gratitude, rather than weigh the personal risks and benefits involved? As is standard, we have attempted to make it clear to potential participants that involvement in our research is voluntary and that their decision to take part either way has no impact on the gatekeeping organisation's service delivery. Our initial consent process is lengthy. It sets out all the ways in which participants information will be used, allows for refusal of different types of use, encourages discussion of any concerns and states their right to withdraw.

Finally, recruitment through gatekeeping organisations is based on their relationships with under-served communities. However, there is inequity within communities as migrants from the same country aren't a homogenous group but are divided by faith, ethnic group, language etc. Whilst the gatekeeper might not have a relationship with certain migrant communities at all. So, who's voice is being heard? Accessing under-served migrant communities through several gatekeepers within each field site is preferable in order to achieve greater reach. Certainly, as a result of this project, our Community Partner GYROS has built a relationship with the Bangladeshi community in Lowestoft.

Conclusion

Gatekeeping is a logical consequence of community co-production. By ensuring that Community Partners are embedded throughout the MigRefHealth project with agreed and funded responsibility for recruitment, has resulted in the successful recruitment of 408 unique participants from 38 countries so far.

However, the mechanism we used is by no means perfect or standardised across sites. There are different levels of gatekeepers utilised throughout the project, with Community Partners also facilitating the identification and involvement of community organisations and individuals as gatekeepers. Each field site has faced its own challenges dependent on their specific demographic, geographic and institutional make up. Hence flexibility needs to be built into the recruitment strategy design and be subject to on-going review, informed by both local stakeholders and participants, to ensure that the specific processes are right for the individual locations and the different migrant populations and sub-groups under study.

Attention needs to be paid to the ethical considerations raised by the use of gatekeepers to recruit vulnerable migrant populations, especially where gatekeepers are part of the project team. Gatekeepers are mainly, but not always, trusted local organisations that provide services, support or activities to migrant groups. Their primary duty is to protect and support underserved populations which can come into conflict with their gatekeeping role of enabling access to research. It needs to be made clear to potential participants that involvement in research is voluntary and that their decision to take part either way has no impact on the gatekeeping organisation's service delivery. Given the involvement of local organisations and individuals in the research team and the creative methods used confidentiality needs to be rigorously

maintained. Whilst on-going review also needs to consider whose voice is being heard from under-served migrant groups and how to include sub-groups.

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