



The Housing Pathways of Liberian New Immigrants in Sheffield

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Introduction

This report presents an overview of the experiences of Liberian new immigrants in Sheffield interviewed as part of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded project exploring the housing experiences of new immigrants during the first five years of settlement in the UK.

In-depth qualitative interviews were undertaken with 39 new immigrants - including ten Liberian respondents - six women and four men, aged between 20 and 38 years old. All had arrived into the UK as refugees under the auspices of the Gateway Protection Programme, a scheme through which the UK accepts and resettles refugees as part of an international resettlement programme run by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Consequently they had Indefinite Leave to Remain. Five were currently living alone and five were living with dependent children or extended family. Nine out of ten were living in social rented property and one was living in a private rented property. Two were in full-time employment, three were students, one person was unemployed and the remainder were looking after the home.

The History of Liberian Immigration into Sheffield

Sheffield does not have a long-standing Liberian population. However, Sheffield was one of the first cities to receive Liberian refugees under the Gateway Protection Programme. The first group of 69 Liberian refugees arrived in the UK in 2004 and were resettled in Sheffield. Most of these refugees had previously been living in refugee camps in Guinea-Conakry.

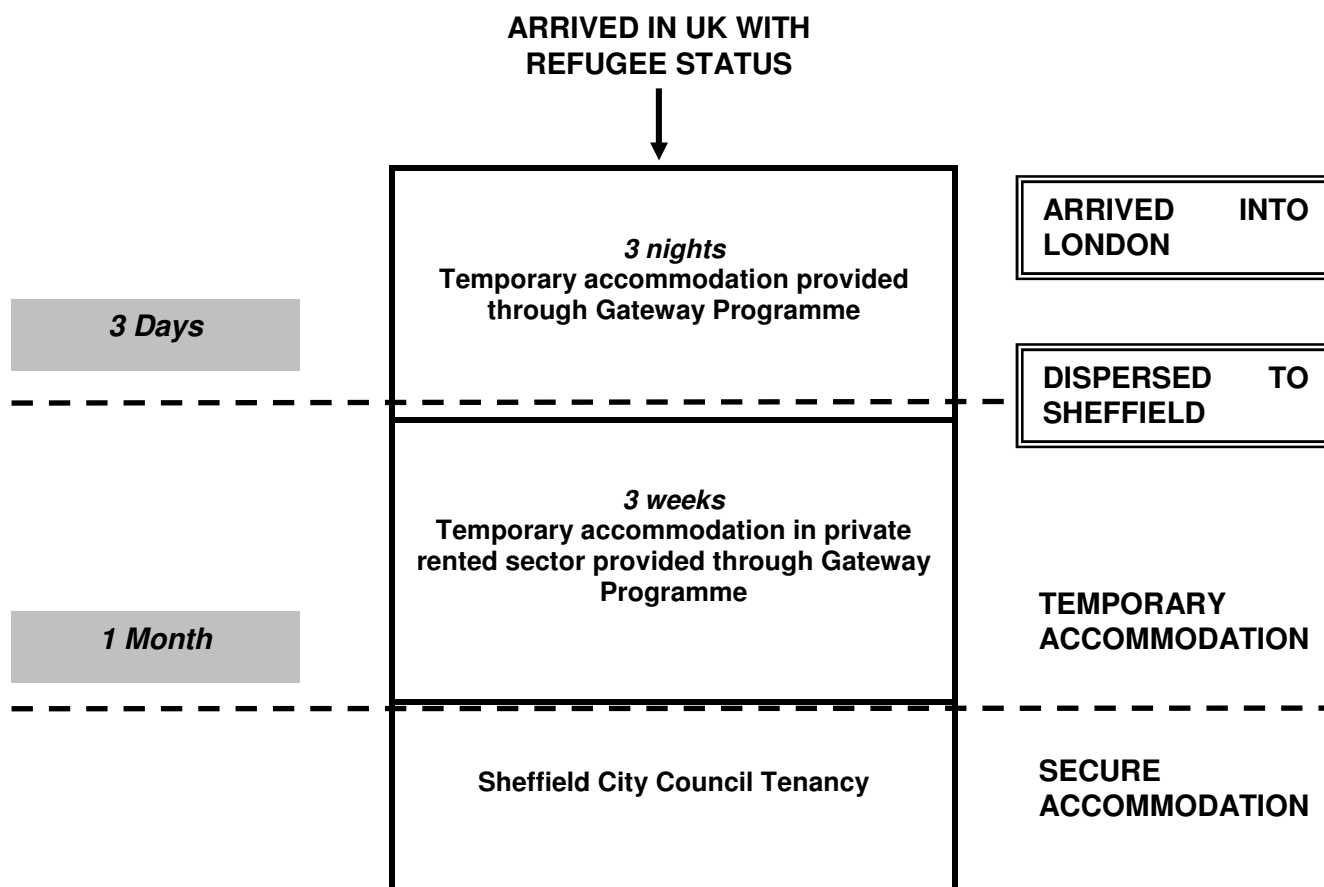
The Housing Careers of Liberian New Immigrants

Key Findings:

- the package of rights and opportunities associated with being a refugee under the auspices of the UN Gateway Protection Programme was an important determinant of the arrival experiences of Liberian new immigrants
- all Liberian new immigrants were brought to Sheffield by the Gateway Protection Programme. Since arriving in Sheffield all had decided to 'hunker down' and remain
- Liberian refugees had a short housing pathway into permanent accommodation.

For Liberian respondents, their initial accommodation served merely as a staging post along the path toward a more long term resting place. The Liberians were distinguished from the other new immigrant populations studied by the level of initial support, including accommodation given to them by statutory and voluntary organisations. Unlike the Somali refugees for example, they typically were settled in long-term accommodation in a couple of housing moves, over a relatively short time period. Central to their early housing careers was the status of Liberian respondents as refugees under the Gateway Protection Programme. They arrived into the UK with the support of the UK government, which provided shared accommodation in London for two or three days, before being relocating to Sheffield.

A Typical Liberian Housing Career: From Arrival to Secure Accommodation



The early housing careers of Liberian respondents were largely directed by the actions of particular key institutions. Entering the UK under the Gateway Programme, they were initially housed in temporary accommodation in London, which was organised by the Home Office. This was followed by a move to Sheffield, that had been planned in advance of their arrival into the UK and reflected an agreement reached between the Home Office, Sheffield City Council and other partners, including the Refugee Council. Temporary accommodation was made available immediately upon their arrival in Sheffield. The legal status of Liberians as refugees, which had been determined prior to their arrival in the UK, conveyed the right of access to opportunities provided by the welfare state, including social housing and associated benefits. Respondents were accommodated in temporary accommodation provided by the council which were dispersed across the city. These nine respondents accepted this offer and moved into a council flat, in most cases within one month of arriving into the UK. The one other Liberian respondent moved into a house in multiple occupation (HMO)¹ in the private rented sector.

Liberian respondents arrived in Sheffield with little or no financial resources and, in most cases, no personal contacts in the city that they might be able to call on for support, assistance or temporary accommodation. Virtually all were reliant on the assistance of local agencies, i.e. the City Council and its partners in the case of Liberian refugees arriving through the Gateway Programme.

Liberian respondents, in common with the Somali immigrants in the study shared a geography of residential settlement once they moved into more permanent, longer-term accommodation. All Liberian respondents were reliant on the help of the local authority for

¹ A property occupied by more than one household and more than two people, that may include bedsits, shared houses and some self contained flats

access to longer term, more secure accommodation and all respondents reported accepting the first tenancy they were offered by the council or a housing association. In most cases, the result was the settlement of Liberian new immigrants in relatively unpopular, peripheral estates characterised by low demand. The early geography of settlement of this group therefore reflected the housing actions of others; new immigrants filling the space within the sector created by households leaving or choosing to avoid social rented accommodation in these particular areas of the city. In sharp contrast to the diverse, multi-ethnic inner city neighbourhoods where some of their temporary accommodation had been located, many of the Liberian new immigrants interviewed therefore tended to find themselves in historically stable, White dominated council estates, with little history of minority ethnic settlement and limited experience of accommodating diversity and difference.

Housing Situations and Experiences

Key findings:

- Liberian new immigrants reported housing experiences (poor living conditions and restricted choices) similar to the recognised experiences of other disadvantaged groups within the housing system (in particular, homeless people)
- family breakdown is a major risk to residential security.

The particular problems reported by respondents depended upon the type of accommodation situation they had been living in. All Liberian respondents had spent some time in hostel or bed and breakfast accommodation and referred to problems of privacy and restrictions on their freedom. Problems with the operation or functioning of heating systems were a recurrent theme among Liberian respondents housed in temporary accommodation upon first arriving in Sheffield. One respondent reported problems understanding how to operate the cooker and heating system, eventually seeking assistance from her support worker at the Refugee Council. Other problems related to overcrowding and provision of material assistance.

Family breakdown is a major risk to residential security. Two respondents had become homeless following a breakdown in relations with a spouse or other relative.

- Bindu reported that she lived in a council flat for 18 months with her brother and his family, but that relations became strained when her niece was born. The flat was overcrowded - four people living in a two bedroom flat – and she was requested to leave. She reported approaching the council, with the support of the Refugee Council officer working on the Gateway Programme, but failed to secure alternative accommodation and ended up living as a guest with a friend for one month. Subsequently, relations with this friend deteriorated and she moved out into a room in a shared house that she was told about by a different friend. She is currently living in this shared house while waiting for an offer of council housing
- Kobor, an 18 year old Liberian man who had been living in a council flat with family members since arriving in the UK through the Gateway Programme, also reported difficulties finding secure accommodation after the flat was repossessed by the council. He immediately turned to friends for help, sleeping on sofas and in spare rooms.

The experiences of Bindu and Kobor parallel the difficulties that many young people in insecure housing situations experience negotiating the transition to independent living and their frequent reliance on informal networks of family and friends for support and a place to stay (Robinson and Coward, 2003). The familiarity of these experiences makes them notable, however. Bindu and Kobor have only been living in the UK for two years, yet in this

short time they have secured a range of resources that are helping them to survive homelessness and search for a new place to live.

The Residential Spaces of New Immigration

Key findings:

- accommodation was the first priority for the majority of Liberians and place of residence was of little importance
- the most important issue was to achieve security of tenure and 'put down roots'
- nonetheless, affiliation to particular places did develop during the first weeks of settlement despite experiences of racial harassment.

Liberian new immigrants were, first and foremost, concerned about their accommodation and place of residence was an issue of surprisingly little importance when discussing residential concerns. When asked to recount their first impressions of where they were living Liberian new immigrants would always focus on the accommodation (conditions, suitability, and security of tenure), in contrast to Somali respondents, who would immediately begin discussing the nature and characteristics of the local neighbourhood.

Liberian new immigrants also attached greater importance to property related aspects of their residential situation than place-based concerns, although they were less dismissive about the importance of place than Polish respondents. In particular, Liberian new immigrants prioritised security of tenure; of finding a place to live where they could 'put down roots' and finally secure the ontological security for so long absent in lives that had been in a state of flux for so many years. Temporary tenancies were often reported to have provided a better living space and to be in preferable locations, but permanent accommodation provided security, which was all important. Some Liberian respondents reported more extreme problems in their local neighbourhood, but remained committed to staying in the same neighbourhood. Several reported serious incidents of abuse and harassment perpetrated against them by local residents – an issue discussed in more detail below - but expressed no desire to move. One woman, for example, described suffering a series of racist attacks on her home on an estate on the southern periphery of the city and reported that she was “*fed up*” and “*not happy*” with this situation. However, she went on to report that “*[the estate] is fine*” and that she wants to continue living there.

The central importance of security to the residential satisfaction of Liberian new immigrants is an understandable response to the years of insecurity, instability and uncertainty in refugee camps in Africa that respondents had typically experienced before arriving in the UK. Significant emotional and psychological capital was invested in the first permanent housing situation in the UK and, in many ways, people could not afford for it to fail.

In contrast to Somali and Pakistani new immigrants, Liberian respondents rarely talked about the benefits that might be associated with living in more diverse, multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. Indeed, it appeared that Liberian new immigrants were often unaware of the particulars of different neighbourhoods and the residential offer they provided and certainly did not share the nuanced reading of the city apparent among Somali new immigrants. Some Liberian participants even expressed an *unwillingness* to live in the very neighbourhoods that Somali new immigrants valued so highly, suggesting that these particular areas provided a poor living environment and were characterised by social problems, including anti-social behaviour.

Engaging with the Housing System

Key findings:

- engagement with housing agencies (such as social landlords) was often dependent upon information and advice received from both formal and informal sources
- some new immigrants developed an awareness of the social rented sector and its regulations and processes over time.

Liberian new immigrants arrived in the UK with a very different bundle of rights and opportunities, but had a shared experience of disenfranchisement from the decisions effecting their housing situations in their first days and weeks of settlement in the UK.

Unfortunately, it appears that this trust was sometimes misplaced as they encountered problems with their accommodation. With the wisdom of hindsight, some Liberian respondents reported being annoyed that they had not become more actively involved in making their own housing history, so to speak, in the hope that they might have been able to change the course of events and effect a more positive outcome. However, their ability to exercise individual agency during these first days and weeks of their housing career in the UK was severely curtailed by their limited knowledge of Sheffield, the local housing market and the bureaucratic regime governing the allocation of social rented accommodation.

There was some evidence, however, of some new immigrants developing an awareness and understanding of the bureaucratic regulations and processes governing the social rented sector. In particular, respondents with more developed English language skills had clearly grasped the mechanics of the process through which they might secure a transfer in the face of racial harassment and, in particular, the importance of providing evidence to support their case. Consequently, they were filling in incident diaries, while other respondents were either unable to take part in diary filling because of limited literacy or language skills or were collecting evidence in a less systematic manner, apparently unaware of the critical importance of this evidence base to their chances of securing a transfer.

About the Study Team

The study was undertaken by Rionach Casey, Kesia Reeve and David Robinson from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University. The Somali interviews were conducted in partnership with Akoi Bazzi and Prince Taylor.

For more information

The full report - The Housing Pathways of New Immigrants - by David Robinson, Kesia Reeve and Rionach Casey is available free to download from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation; www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop. The summary reports profiling the experiences of the different new immigrant populations surveyed (Liberian, Somali, Pakistani and Polish) are available to download free from the CRESR website; http://www.shu.ac.uk/cresr/publications/publication_downloads.html.