

The Bristol Plan for Migrant Learners

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About the project

The Bristol Plan for Migrant Learners set out to understand how professionals work together to support young migrants. We knew that public services were under increasing pressure and that the system of professional support was increasingly fragmented, but needed greater insight into exactly what was happening, how it could be improved and what stood in the way of that improvement. This study set out to change that.

Our previous research had found that there was little day-to-day coordination between schools and the other services that young migrants were involved with, resulting in significant gaps in provision and adverse outcomes. The Bristol Plan for Migrant Learners builds on that work, bringing together a wide range of professionals in a single city, Bristol, to understand how they work together.

We were particularly interested in consensus, looking for issues and proposals that attracted broad support from across the sector. We knew that this would be hard to find because our participants came from very different backgrounds and had different goals, expertise and expectations; but that when they did agree, it would mean something important for the system as a whole. Their disagreements, too, were often important and informative in themselves.

Policy recommendations

The first three recommendations support capacity in the sector, focusing on communication and coordination between services. The final three address the most promising avenues for long-term change.

1. A coordinated approach to basic needs is an urgent priority

Progress is likely to be slow until we can offer a secure foundation for young migrants. This will certainly include stable accommodation and healthcare. Legal advice and access to education are likely to be high priorities.

2. Appoint a single person to coordinate support for young migrants

Young people fall through the gaps when services are under intense pressure. A single point of contact to coordinate support - including alerting services that they will be needed in the near future - is important to mitigate that risk.

3. Cross-service training is important for effective collaboration

Training should involve a range of services, be delivered by current practitioners and be fully or mostly in person. This allows for the networking - and trust - that leads to cross-service understanding and more effective support for young migrants.

4. Invest in data management and analytical capacity

We currently have a weak overview of the number of young migrants in the system, what services they are engaged with and how they are progressing. This means that information is siloed and gaps are created. Investing in a coordinated data management platform will help to close those gaps and allow services to plan ahead.

5. Connectors and specialists

We do not formally recognise the role of 'connectors', those who advocate across the system for young people. They often feel they are fighting against the system and the interests of each service in isolation. Identifying them and creating formal spaces for their perspective to be heard will reduce gaps in provision.

6. Invest in the voluntary sector

Charities and volunteers provide a wide range of services and often have deep insight into the young people they serve, but usually without the professional expertise of specialists or the long-term capacity of established services. A strategic review of their role is needed, with targeted investment in their capacity so that they can play an effective, long-term role in the lives of young migrants.

Findings

We found three main areas of agreement. We also found that participants disagreed in important and informative ways.

Main areas of consensus

1. Accommodation is a problem.
2. Everything is important!
3. The system is fragmented but participants want to be connected.

We asked three questions to establish the big picture. We first gave participants a list of 11 services to rate according to their importance and urgency. We then gave five statements that required a trade-off between priorities. From these, supported by the findings from the rest of the survey, we identified three main areas of consensus.

Accommodation is a major problem

Accommodation, including foster care, was the single most important issue reported by participants, 100% of whom rated it 'important and urgent'.

“No one should have to choose between having a home and going to school.”

ESOL lecturer

It is the most prominent of a set of basic needs that varied only a little between respondents: an EAL coordinator identified “housing, healthcare and mental health care” as priorities, for example, whereas a social worker pointed to “accommodation and legal advice ... followed by education”. These basic needs span several services but we found that they should be treated together. A coordinated approach would have some flexibility but would also ensure that young people had a secure foundation to build on.



“We have so little time to do this in our working lives, it can be very powerful to be able to share ideas across services.”

Teacher

Everything is important!

The need for coordination is also seen in the broad consensus for each of the services we asked about. The participants rated them 'important and urgent' or 'important, not urgent', with the exception of 'sports, youth clubs and other enrichment' (which fell only a little short of our threshold for consensus).

This tells us something important: that we need to address the system of professional support as a whole, rather than trying to address each service in isolation. The findings suggest that trying to improve educational attainment without finding secure housing, for example, or treating mental health without access to legal representation, will have only limited success. As well as a core of basic needs, the study shows the importance of developing different services in parallel and developing shared understanding of how each young person is engaging with the services they use.

The system is fragmented but participants want to be connected

There is good evidence that the professionals involved would welcome this coordinated approach. When we asked them to tell us about the system they work within, there was consensus that:

- there are gaps in provision for young migrants;
- services are overstretched;
- we lack a single point of contact to coordinate services.

Only one statement in this set, about a lack of awareness among professionals about which services exist, did not reach consensus.

“Closer cooperation between professionals and local charities and volunteers would serve those resettling here.”

Volunteer coordinator

This again paints a clear picture: the professionals in this study are aware of each other but the lack of funding and overall coordination creates gaps. We shall explore this more fully in the sections that follow and we will see the deep commitment to working together more effectively.

Further findings

As well as the three overarching findings about the system, the study gave insight into how professionals work together across services. Here, we summarise the main themes and highlight areas of consensus and disagreement.

Communication between services

In the first round of the study, we asked participants to rank the effectiveness of ten services that support young migrants. There was no consensus that any service was 'effective' or 'very effective'. Instead, we found consensus that many services were 'ineffective' or 'very ineffective' (including for mental health, healthcare, legal advice, and sports, youth clubs and enrichment). There was also consensus that it was not easy to communicate with other services, to find the people you need, to reach agreement, or to get other people to act. This overwhelmingly negative response shows a system in crisis.

Learning from each other

This crisis did not lead to mistrust or apathy: there was consensus that participants wanted to learn more about each other's roles and could offer training in their own areas of expertise.

That training should:

- involve a range of professionals so that people can meet each other and learn together
- be delivered by current practitioners (for example peer learning across the sector)
- be fully or mostly in person

There was no consensus for targeting particular services (to promote learning within a specific field) or for online learning. Participants wanted to learn from each other, in person, "to be able to relate to other professionals" (foster carer) and "build networks with the view to support young people" (social worker).

“One person who oversees the young person would be amazing, almost like a social worker who coordinates with school, council, home and other services.”

EAL coordinator

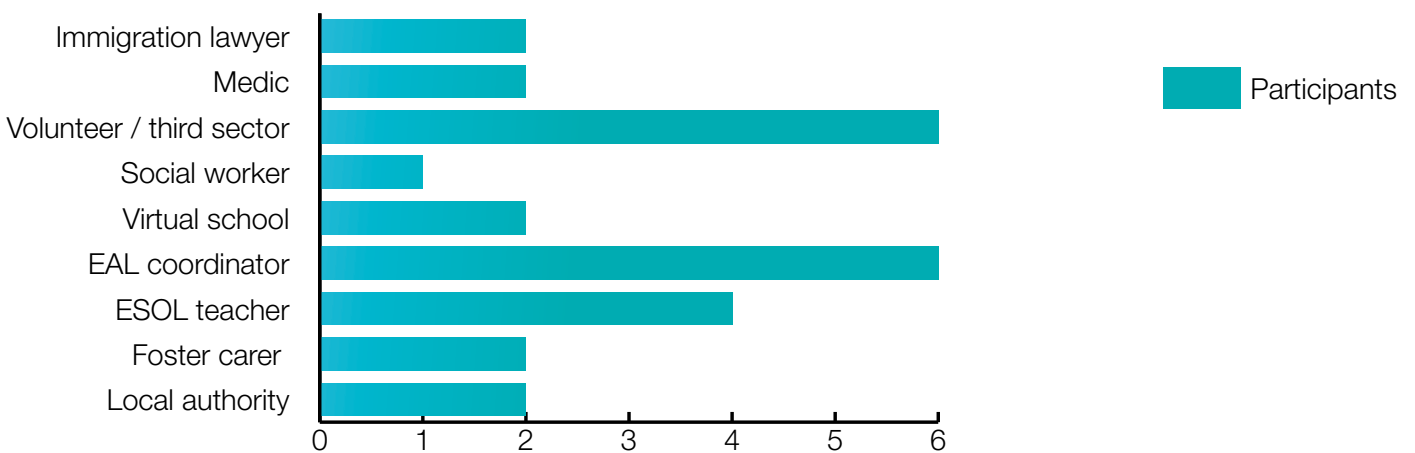
Specialists, generalists and 'connectors'

We asked how participants understood their role in this system. Some saw themselves as generalists who need an overview of the system to offer effective support; others as specialists who need narrow expertise. A number gave mixed responses and wrote about their role in advocating for young people across the system. The work of these 'connectors' is not well understood, but in a fragmented system where professionals are actively seeking ways to communicate with each other, it is worth looking closely at those who are already bridging the silos.

“Actually what I find more important is the verb 'to act' ... that we actually do commit to act. We must all work together as service providers and fellow humans to help and support others in whatever way we can while to the best of our ability causing no harm.”

ESOL lecturer

Figure 1: Background of participants



Closing comments

This study set out to understand the system of professional support for young migrants in Bristol. It found people who were deeply committed to their work and the young people they serve but who were often close to burning out from the stress of working in an underfunded, fragmented system. There is a striking contrast between their positivity and collegiality, and their clear articulation of how bad things have become. The data make for sobering reading.

The study also found important ways forward. There is much we can do to improve communication and coordination, easing the burden that people are working under, even in a constrained funding and policy environment. There are also promising opportunities for investment, particularly in data management and in the voluntary sector, where a strategic approach may yield significant benefits. Further research is, of course, required and will help us to understand exactly how to take advantage of these opportunities.

How we did this research

Study design

We used a Delphi Consensus method to help understand the main areas of agreement and disagreement among professionals in the city. This involved a survey with statements that participants rate or rank, as well as open-ended questions for additional detail. We defined consensus as when 75% of participants 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with a statement or, for the ranking items, when 75% of participants ranked a statement in their top three. The survey was run twice, with adjustments made by the research team between rounds. This allowed for refinement over time as we identified the issues that really mattered to the participants.

The findings presented here are taken from the second round of the Delphi study unless otherwise noted.

Who were the participants?

We held six initial interviews to guide the design of the Delphi survey. A total of 28 people participated in the first round and 22 in the second round. They came from a range of professional backgrounds, detailed in figure 1.

Further information

The Bristol Plan for Migrant Learners was organised by Dr Robert Sharples (principal investigator), Jules Godfrey (co-investigator) and Eleanor Chapman (research assistant). Ginnie Mallinson helped to organise the two launch events.

The project team can be contacted on bpml-project@bristol.ac.uk.

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The Delphi method requires that participants remain anonymous and we cannot thank them by name here. We are deeply grateful for their time and their thoughtful responses to our surveys. We can name some of those who took part in the initial interviews: Ella Farina, Aurelie Andouard, Kate Hawkes, Rashid Khashy and Barbara Ricci – thank you! Your insight shaped the project and steered us towards the issues that really matter. Any errors remain, of course, our own.