

Transcript

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Hello and welcome to yet another edition of the Migration Oxford podcast.

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I'm Rob McNeill.

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And I am Sanna van Oosten.

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So the wonderful Sanna van Oosten is joining us today as our newly minted Migration Oxford podcast host and she's going to be doing this conversation.

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Sanna, over to you.

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So today we're going to be talking with Beacon Mbiba and Philip Thorpe about the question, what does it really take to build communities where everyone can participate and contribute and thrive?

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And how is this a two-way process?

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Brilliant.

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Okay, well, let's go.

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Could you please introduce yourself and tell us a little bit more about what your research is about?

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I'm Beacon Mbiba.

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I am a senior lecturer at Oxford Brookes University.

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I work on migration, diaspora and development.

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specialized mainly on cities.

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Yes, thank you.

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I'm Philip Thorpe.

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I'm an independent migration consultant based in Oxford.

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I have 20 years experience of working with migration on an operational level really around the world.

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So that's with small frontline charities as well as UN agencies and supporting governments across the world.

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I recently returned back to the UK because

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Although I've spent a lot of time working elsewhere, I'm becoming increasingly frustrated and concerned about the situation for migration in the UK.

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Beacon and I have been working together for the last few years under the mantle of Migrant Voices Collective.

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Our work focuses on situations that migrants in the UK find themselves in and we try to provide solutions which have the voice of the migrant at the centre of them.

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As part of this, Migrant Voices Collective was commissioned by the Oxfordshire Migration Partnership to look at the situation for the increasing numbers of migrants arriving in Oxfordshire as they were interested in ensuring that they were providing services

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as effectively as possible to meet the needs of migrants.

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And how is Oxfordshire addressing this?

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Like, what's special about Oxfordshire or different and how does it differ from other places?

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I mean, what says a lot about Oxfordshire is that

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we were approached for this piece of work.

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We were approached specifically, the brief was that as a group, the Oxford Migration Partnership recognised that they have a growing number of people coming into the county and that their services didn't necessarily address the needs of migrants as well as they could do.

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So we were commissioned as external

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experts to provide an analysis of the service use of migrants in the county.

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It says a lot about the county that there was such a proactive reach out and the work produced a very interesting analysis of

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of the county and the different experiences of migrants in different parts of the county.

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I would say geography matters.

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And just within our local neighbourhoods, comparing with other neighbouring boroughs, those who arrive in communities where there's a higher concentration of people of migration heritage, they get more opportunity

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for leveraging information from those individuals.

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Those communities have more experience, they have more institutional capacity to deal with new arrivals.

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Those in larger settlements, there are also incidental opportunities where someone without talking to anybody can get information by just walking down a street.

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which doesn't happen as much in a very rural environment in a small town.

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We know more about the big cities, London, Glasgow, but less about those rural environments that I mentioned.

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And that's where we need to be understanding better because most of the new arrivals in recent years, since 2021, they have gone to those small places, small settlements in the rural areas, which is quite unique.

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Previously, that was not the case.

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even for those like the Ukrainians who had the opportunity to choose where they would want to go.

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They did not end up in big cities.

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And so it's important to look at these, how these neighborhoods experience the new arrivals and reacted to them.

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Right.

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And so what makes the biggest difference to whether someone can successfully build a life in a new place and how do we know what people actually need?

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I mean,

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so that everybody can win.

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So in our work, we've talked about integration drivers.

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And these are these conditions which are essential for sustainable integration to occur.

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And as we've heard there, we're talking about health.

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We're talking about housing, language, transport, education, employment.

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And it's about how these services are provided in ways which are accessible to migrants.

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Most of the everyday barriers have to do with the institutional arrangement of how the different groups of arrivals are managed.

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It's typically extreme for those who are in the hotel environments, for example.

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The home office places them in positions

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where they're invisible to us.

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You and I, charities, at the time of our study, reported that the difficulties accessing these hotels, it was not routine.

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It depended very much on how they negotiated with the private sector provider who was contacted by the Home Office, when we would expect that to be standard.

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So even those who want to go in and support with these kinds of services,

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would have difficulties at the time we're doing our study.

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So the physical location makes a barrier.

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We can differentiate between barriers that have been put in place purposefully and barriers which exist, which perhaps are not recognised or not purposefully put in place.

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So we see all around

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the result of years now of the hostile environment policy, which is essentially a series of decisions and policy actions to make the environment more challenging for migrants.

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And this is a purposeful approach which intends really to reduce the number of migrants arriving.

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There's A plethora of research out there that tells us that people who are forced to flee are usually not deterred by things like policy decisions, not least because usually they don't know about the policies that are in place in the intended destinations if they even know what the intended destination is.

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So it's unfortunate that there are these barriers put in place

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specifically making things more difficult for migrants.

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But there are others which exist anyway.

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And that's of course things like language barriers.

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Language really came up in our research as the number one, what I wish I had when I arrived from migrants that we spoke to.

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But also there's a lot of barriers that are technological or

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we spoke to migrants who said, in England, everything that you want to do, you have to do online.

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And if you think about it, that is how society's kind of become here, right?

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To go to the library now, you need to be online, to go to the doctor, you need to be online.

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Everything's become very digital.

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So there are a lot of digital barriers.

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And I think a lot of the

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information and services that are provided for migrants don't really understand that migrants may be coming from a place with very different digital understanding.

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So that's a huge barrier that's in place.

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But then there are just many day-to-day practical barriers which exist for people coming into our society from a different one.

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And many of those came up during our focus groups.

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Our work is kind of premised on the notion that in order to provide meaningful services for migrants, you need to understand the voices of migrants.

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So a lot of our work involves talking to migrants.

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And we heard stories through that of things like the challenges of getting to school.

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It's great that we've got a school place,

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but I've got 2 little kids and they're at school in two different parts of the city.

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We're hearing about people walking for miles and miles a day just to get the kids to school.

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And of course, our inclement weather in the UK is often challenging as well.

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So people don't have a raincoat, people don't have wellies, yet they're walking miles and miles across the city.

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And of course, this stops people from going to school

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stops people from participating in society.

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So these are barriers which are perhaps invisible until you talk to people who are actually having the experience of integrating and understanding their perspective.

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This is why in our work we really emphasise the importance of information being provided through the lens of a migrant.

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Information has to

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understand the experience of a migrant in order to be relevant.

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There's no point putting generic information about how to do things on a website.

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You need to talk to migrants, understand their perspective, and maybe have them feed into the ways that information is provided.

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Just to underline that point, which we, and link it to some of the things we discussed earlier on, the importance of face to face

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encounters and delivery in the initial stages before people can use these apps, these websites, just understanding what is a GP.

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Arrivals come from environments where they have no buses.

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They don't have traffic lights.

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They don't have an MOT.

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When migrants eventually move on from and begin to work, they will need to drive.

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The importance of an insurance and having an MOT, they cannot get that without encounters and a conversation with somebody face to face, especially someone who has whom they trust, somebody who has a migrant experience, intermediaries who have

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who have a migrant, not only migrant origin, but who has experience working with new arrivals who can relate.

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Let me use that word.

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And if that is not there, try to build it.

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And credit to most people who have encountered, officials who have encountered, it was a steep learning curve.

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2016, they had nothing.

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2021 to 2023, it was a steep learning curve and by 2024, schools, for example, they're saying bring it on.

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Wherever new arrivals are from, bring them on, we can deal with it now.

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So credit to them, they have understood the importance of engaging and listening to the new arrivals and giving this initial resource, the ability to

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understand what is in their environment, understand the terms, then go on and operate independently.

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Phil mentioned the hostile environment policy, where we have seen everybody, every institution from schools, hospitals, estate agents being made home office officials checking on everything.

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So the moment they see somebody who is not

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part of the host community or they think is not part of the host community, they go into overdrive to check on eligibility as a migrant and they make it tough for them to jump the hoops.

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Let me take the housing scenario within that context.

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You then find when new arrivals go into the open market as they have to do eventually to find accommodation in the private sector, they have to have

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an address.

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They have to have some deposit.

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They have to have a history of working and some pay slips.

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They have to have all those documents which they don't have on arrival.

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Now, how do they get a house without those?

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And this is where you

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see some of the local authority initiatives we mentioned, being proactive earlier on.

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Local authorities like in Oxfordshire and elsewhere coming forward and saying, let's be the guarantors for these individuals.

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Working with these state agents and saying, if somebody in this category comes over, we are going to be able to offer these services.

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Yeah, they don't have an address, they don't have any deposit, but we will be the guarantor.

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And if you look at advice provided by UNHCR and others, it's all about providing processes that adapt.

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And this comes back to the beginning to what we were talking about, which is this is a two-way process.

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If you want people to integrate effectively, you've got to adapt your infrastructure, your systems to

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to allow for that integration to take place.

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It's not about making it easier or prioritising migrants over citizens.

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It's about giving them an equal playing field.

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It's not fair to expect people to integrate if we provide conditions which actually

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make it impossible to integrate.

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And just examples of that are, for example, opening a bank account.

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As Biba has just mentioned, migrants don't tend to come with a package of documents which a bank would like to see for them to open a bank account.

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So we usually like to have good identity cards.

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We want to have a history of income and so on.

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We might like to have a guarantor.

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And that doesn't exist for many people who've been forced to flee.

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But institutions elsewhere and systems elsewhere have demonstrated that if we understand the situation that those migrants are coming from, we can adapt our systems without overly increasing the risk to anyone.

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We can provide systems which are accessible to all.

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Right.

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And, you know, and this stuff providing services, I mean, they don't happen for free.

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I mean, this is something that costs money.

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So do local authorities, by implementing the right policies, find a way to make it into the business case, for better or for worse?

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I'm just wondering how that works.

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Yeah, in terms of the costs, you know, what's frustrating for us with our work is that we can see that

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the approach being taken to make things more challenging for migrants actually ends up costing the taxpayer more money.

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It doesn't deter people from coming as I've said, but it prevents them from participating early.

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It requires them to remain supported by the state for longer.

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The failure to

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effectively route people into work when they're able to work means people are on the dole on benefits on job support for longer.

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The failure to address health needs early means trauma and the effects of trauma last longer than they need to.

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And also the

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particularly challenging situation around the short time for moving on for refugees who are given status to find a house means that the whole system hugely contributes to the homelessness challenges in the UK.

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So actually all of these

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systems that have been put in place to make things more challenging, to deter people from coming are actually ending up costing government more.

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I think that what we've seen in proactive local authorities does represent both a desire to do better

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for those migrants, but also an understanding that it's cost effective to do better for those migrants.

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Coming back full circle to where we started the discussion, this is about the whole of community, the whole of society, and having people who are able to be effective, to contribute, to live good and happy lives.

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ultimately benefits all of us.

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Whereas having people with persistent mental health challenges who are not able to access work, who are not able to use language in order to take other opportunities, who are not able to find housing and move on in their lives effectively, quickly, means that overall

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the cost is higher to us.

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So all of this work really is about saying, let's see the shared potential of migration and stop worrying about the potential risks of migration.

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I'm not saying migration doesn't carry risks or that amongst migrants there are people who present a risk, but I'm saying that it's short-sighted to see all of this as a risk and fail to see it as an opportunity.

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In a more enlightened situation, you can imagine decision makers recognising the potential of migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, whoever you like to refer to them as, humanitarian migrants is the term that we use, the potential of those people who represent a cross section of another society to support

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for example, our hospitals, our schools.

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Giving people the ability to work allows them to contribute to society in ways that are practical but also financial.

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Really we want to see migrants as effectively, as quickly as possible, becoming contributing members of society.

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And the way to do that is opening up pathways to work and not closing them

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Unfortunately, what we've seen is the pathways being closed.

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I wanted just, if we have time, to underline that relationship.

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One of the key things that we came up with, we identified, which was observed elsewhere again, is this marginalization of local authorities by the Home Office, the Home Office going for the private sector.

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At some points, local authorities would only

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get a very short notice overnight to get to know that individuals are coming into their area.

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That doesn't give an opportunity to do those things that we're talking about, the preparedness to get to understand the new arrivals.

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And it's also expensive in the long term.

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The local authority ends up spending more than it would have spent if it had been better prepared.

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And so

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I think what the evidence in our studies show is we could have better value for money if some of that money that goes to the private contractors goes to local authorities instead, especially for provision of housing, for provision of transport.

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The local authorities would spread that out and give it as bus passes to more people than one taxi ride to the GP.

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which has been happening with the local authorities.

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And at the time of our study, that was the status quo.

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Right.

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Okay, I'm going to move on to the last question.

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So I'm just wondering, hearing all of this, are the lessons that we learn from migrant integration, are they really about integration or do they tell us something about how our societies function and how do we build communities?

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How do we build communities that work for everyone?

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Oxfordshire County Council, coming back to some of the things we discussed earlier, they addressed this, for example, through the free, the bus passes.

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Ukrainians were given three months bus pass facilities.

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The other migrants were not, for instance.

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So you see a differentiated approach.

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So there's a recognition that these are barriers, mobility is a barrier, everyday barrier, but we are not helping to provide it.

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But where it is provided, and this is where Oxfordshire made a big difference by experimenting and saying, let's just experiment and use our limited resources to see how we can broaden the group of people who get this facility.

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And we see how important it is.

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not just for the new arrivals, but also for some of our vulnerable members of community in our host community.

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The need for mobility, children from disadvantaged backgrounds, poor households, need for mobility during summer holidays.

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We all can share that experience of isolation and

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When this intervention is made, it makes a huge difference.

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And for me, it shows how we can share the lessons of dealing with barriers from this sector of new arrivals and make it part of the mainstream.

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And that was part of what our commissioners were asking us to look at, how to make some of the work we are doing with migration part of the mainstream way of delivering services to the community.

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You ask whether this is about migration or broader than that.

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And for me, this is more about building resilient communities, moving away from hostility towards resilience.

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As a society, as a community, whatever level you want to pitch it at, we have needs which we cannot meet

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internally alone.

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We rely on others.

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The mistrust and fear of migrants isn't something new.

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This is well documented in the literature.

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in language, Indo-European words, meaning stranger or *etranger* or *estranieri*, all mean the same thing, which is something, someone which is from outside.

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They're different.

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And that difference is what people

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struggle with.

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Who are these people?

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We've seen some very interesting interviews with communities in the UK who are concerned about the presence of asylum hotels in their towns, but when pushed as to what it is that they're really worried about, they just know that these people are from outside, they're different and they worry that maybe they present a risk.

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And when positioned alongside senior political figures standing at lecterns that caution about stopping the boats and media talking about invasions and cautioning about the risk posed by these outsiders, it's easy to see that society is going to become more hostile and less resilient.

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My hope is that we can become more enlightened by listening to the voices of migrants and see the benefit that migration brings to our communities rather than just worrying about the risk.

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Great.

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Well, this is an excellent ending to our podcast.

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I want to thank you so much, Mikan Mabiba and Philip Thorpe.

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Thanks so much for being on this podcast.

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Thank you.

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Welcome.

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Thank you.

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Well, that was an absolutely fascinating conversation, Sana.

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So I'm really interested to sort of quiz you a little bit, if you don't mind, about how does this relate to your work?

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I mean, the things that you do yourself, Sana.

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Yeah, so here at Compass, I've been researching discrimination in the housing market and in the labour market and these policies

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set up by the government are making it more difficult for migrants to actually start working and start paying taxes, which would then in the end actually benefit the same government.

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so I thought that really tied into my research.

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Which makes a lot of sense.

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I mean, even in my own limited experience of living in another country for a brief period of time, even in a country where I could speak the language of the nation because it was the US, I still found it extraordinarily difficult often just to find my way around and to make my way through the complexity of the systems.

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I thought it was really interesting to listen to the beacon was talking about the fact that like people don't even know what a GP is, let alone that they have to register for one.

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I have a lot of examples on this as well.

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I mean, I'm also an immigrant to Oxford, so experience it all.

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Well, on that note, I think that it's probably best for us to just say a big thank you to everybody for listening and we'll see you next time on the Migration Oxford podcast.

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Or well, you'll hear us next time.