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Soye, E., & Watters, C. (2024). On placemaking and wellbeing: Practitioner perspectives on third sector support for refugees and asylum seekers. *Wellbeing, Space and Society*, 6, Article 100205.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wss.2024.100205>

Published in:

Wellbeing, Space and Society

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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On placemaking and wellbeing: Practitioner perspectives on third sector support for refugees and asylum seekers

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Placemaking
Wellbeing
Asylum seekers
Refugees
Third sector organisations

ABSTRACT

Migration studies foreground 'placemaking' as key to the wellbeing of refugees and asylum seekers. In the absence of state support, third sector organisations play a significant role in supporting refugee placemaking and wellbeing. Yet very little is known about how third sector practitioners themselves conceptualise and support refugee placemaking and wellbeing on the basis of their own experiences in the field. This article responds to the gap in the literature by drawing on five semi-structured interviews with third sector practitioners who work with refugees and asylum seekers in southeast England. The research found that third sector practitioners conceptualise (and support) refugee placemaking and wellbeing in terms of 'belonging', 'knowing', 'contributing', 'connecting', and 'remembering'. In sharing the perspectives of third sector practitioners, this research makes an original contribution to scholarship on placemaking and wellbeing in contexts of forced displacement.

Introduction

Nearly 35.3 million people worldwide have been 'dis-placed' by conflict, persecution, and other human rights abuses. 'Culturalist' readings of displacement naturalise the link between people and place, viewing refugees and asylum seekers as 'being torn loose from their place and thus from their culture and identity' (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992; Malkki, 1992; Massey, 1994; Brun, 2001:15). The result is 'a vision of displacement as pathological' (Malkki, 1992:34). In recent years, scholarship has started to move away from this vision by complicating the relationship between people and place, arguing that 'place' must be understood as fluid and permeable, socially constructed and maintained, and imagined and remembered in different ways (Said, 2000). As Said (ibid.:180) suggests, particular places are ascribed (often contested) symbolic meanings and 'can be manipulated, invented, characterized quite apart from a site's merely physical reality'. Studies have detailed how post-migration contexts are shaped from the bottom-up through everyday practices (including local and transnational connections), and from the top-down through political structures (Brun, 2001; Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2016; Magan and Padgett, 2021; Bunn et al., 2023). Urban placemaking is shared by locals and

newcomers, who 'together build aspects of their social belonging to the city' (Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2016:19). Other studies have begun to highlight a close relationship between refugee wellbeing and the social, economic, cultural, environmental, and material characteristics of 'place' (Sampson and Gifford, 2010; Coughlan and Hermes, 2016; Biglin, 2020; Ermansons et al., 2023).

Despite growing attention to the relationship between refugee placemaking and wellbeing, a lack of knowledge remains regarding 'the barriers to making place, and how these might be overcome to better address the unique and complex health needs of resettled refugees' (Yashadhana et al., 2023:2). In particular, very little is known about how third sector organisations (TSOs) support refugees and asylum seekers in making place. TSOs include non-governmental organisations (NGOs), charities, and community and faith-based groups. Mayblin and James (2019:376) observe that while TSOs clearly play an important role in 'filling gaps' in state provision for asylum seekers and refugees at the local level, this work remains 'under-researched and under-theorised'. Although research has highlighted the positive impact of organised placemaking activities such as community gardens (Biglin, 2020; Storm et al., 2023) and participation in the arts (McIntyre et al., 2022) for refugees and asylum seekers, the role of TSOs in organising these

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activities is implicit rather than explicit in these studies. This article aims to contribute to understanding of the role of TSOs in refugee¹ placemaking and wellbeing through five in-depth interviews with third sector practitioners in southeast England. Our research question is, ‘How do third sector practitioners conceptualise (and support) refugee wellbeing and placemaking?’. Before presenting the research findings we give a brief overview of the UK migration context and outline the research methodology.

UK migration context

While this study focuses on refugee placemaking and wellbeing in the global North, it is important to note that more migration occurs between countries within the global South (Nawyn, 2016). Among destination countries in the global North, the UK has in recent years experienced broadly similar levels of migration to other high-income countries such as the United States and Spain. In 2012, the British government introduced the ‘hostile environment policy’, a set of administrative and legislative measures which sought to make staying in the UK as difficult as possible for people without leave to remain. A United Nations report suggests that these measures have helped to foster xenophobia and racism among private and public actors in the UK (Achieme, 2019). Since the EU referendum or ‘Brexit’ in 2016, there has been a gradual increase in non-EU net migration to the UK (Sumption et al., 2023). In January 2021, the UK government implemented a new points-based immigration system, which puts emphasis on ‘skilled’ workers and gives equal treatment to EU and non-EU citizens. In March of the same year, a two-tier system was introduced under the ‘New Plan for Immigration’, which puts a strong focus on preventing ‘irregular migration’ and discriminates against asylum applicants who reach the UK by illegal means. This system was later enshrined in law in the Nationality and Borders Act in 2022, and in the Illegal Migration Act in 2023.

In 2022, there were 81,130 asylum applications, the highest number of applications since 2002; asylum seekers made up approximately one fifth of immigrants to the UK in that year. Around 50% of asylum applications were made by people who had travelled to England in small boats (Sturge, 2023). The British government contracts private companies to provide accommodation to asylum seekers on a ‘no-choice’ basis. In recent years, a severe shortage of housing in all parts of the UK has led to a significant rise in the use of emergency or ‘contingency’ asylum accommodation such as hotels, B&Bs, hostels, and even army barracks (British Red Cross, 2021; Refugee Council, 2022; Soye, 2022; Soye and Watters, 2022). People seeking asylum in the UK are not permitted to work and instead receive basic subsistence support from the Home Office through a debit payment card (‘Asylum Support Enablement’ or ‘ASPEN’). Dwyer and Brown (2005) suggest that statutory provisions are failing to meet the basic financial and housing needs of many forced migrants in Britain. An increasing number of small, local, and volunteer-run TSOs have been established with the aim of responding to these needs (Mayblin and James, 2019). In 1990, there were seven TSOs focusing on alleviating poverty and destitution amongst asylum seekers, refused asylum seekers, and refugees in England and Wales. In 2019, there were at least 142 (ibid.).

Methodology

This article draws on five semi-structured interviews conducted with

¹ When discussing placemaking in this article, we sometimes use ‘refugee’ as shorthand for forced migrants, including asylum seekers and asylum seekers who have been refused asylum. We recognise that these categories or ‘labels’ have distinct implications for placemaking and wellbeing (Zetter, 1991; Erdal and Oeppen, 2018) and as such only use shorthand where these categories are not relevant to the argument at hand.

individuals working or volunteering at TSOs in southeast England: a refugee day centre, a faith-based community organisation, two small charities (operating at local and national levels), and a church. Unusually for TSOs, which tend to operate ‘below the radar’ (McCabe et al., 2010), all apart from the church had recognised legal status as charitable organisations.

The refugee day centre offers practical assistance to asylum seekers and refugees in the local area. This includes providing emergency food, clothes and toiletries, language classes, and facilitating activities including games and gardening.

The faith-based (Christian) community organisation supports asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) through English conversation classes, food, clothing, toiletries, immigration advice, and links to counselling and education support.

The small local charity supports unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee minors in the local area, providing immigration advice, education support, and organised activities.

The national charity provides asylum seekers and refugees with housing by placing them with ‘hosts’ across the UK.

The church runs a food bank in partnership with a local organisation and provides cooked meals for local families twice a week, including asylum seekers and refugees. During the COVID-19 lockdowns the church was permitted to open during the day, providing a ‘drop-in’ community space.

The recruitment process involved multiple stages. A systematic mapping was conducted of TSOs supporting forced migrants (including asylum seekers, refugees, and refused asylum seekers) in southeast England. These organisations were then contacted via email. A total of six organisations accepted the invitation to interview. Interview participants were asked to read information sheets and to sign consent forms prior to each interview. They were assured of anonymity and given the contact details of national mental health organisations in case the interviews caused emotional upset (Lowes and Paul, 2006). Ethical clearance for the research was obtained from the Institute of Development Studies.

The authors prepared a guide for the semi-structured interviews. The guide included questions to participants about the organisations they worked at, their roles, their perceptions of challenges and opportunities to refugee wellbeing and placemaking, and the impact on their work of Brexit and COVID-19. The first author conducted the semi-structured interviews between August and November 2021. Five interviews took place on Zoom, and one on the phone. The latter interview did not contribute to our analysis and therefore is not included in the article; the interview was also shorter in length (30 min) than the other interviews, which were 54 min on average. The length of each interview is given below. We also note the name (pseudonymised) and role of each practitioner.

Interviews included in analysis.

Third sector organisation	Interviewee name	Interviewee role	Length of interview (hours/minutes)
Refugee day centre	Jess	Outreach worker	00:59
Community organisation	Helen	Founder and Director	00:59
Local charity	Uma	Director	00:44
National charity	Abigail	Co-Founder and Director	01:07
Church	Kirsten	Vicar	00:42

All of the interviewees had senior roles at their organisations. All had been working at their organisations for a number of years; several had founded their organisations. All were women, giving the research a distinct gender bias. All were born in England although several had family histories of migration. It is also important to note the

positionality of the interviewer, since, as [Mason \(2002\)](#) asserts, the researcher's positionality inevitably influences the research process, from data collection to data analysis. The first author, who conducted the interviews, is a White British, female researcher with a background in Development Studies and Social Work and Social Care.

The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and later transcribed. The interview findings were analysed using an iterative process of thematic analysis ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)). We began this process by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, making notes on and highlighting emerging themes in relation to how third sector practitioners conceptualise (and support) refugee placemaking and wellbeing. We returned to the material many times to consolidate and eventually finalise the themes as 'belonging', 'knowing', 'contributing', 'connecting', and 'remembering'. We have deliberately used verbs in order to emphasise placemaking as a *process*, confounding essentialist understandings of 'place' as something to be possessed or dispossessed.

The views of third sector practitioners

Returning to the research question, how do third sector practitioners conceptualise (and support) refugee placemaking and wellbeing in southeast England? Our findings suggest five interrelated components. Firstly, third sector practitioners see refugee placemaking and wellbeing as involving participation or 'belonging'. Secondly, they understand refugee placemaking and wellbeing to involve various forms of 'knowing'. They also see 'contributing' to society and to the work of TSOs as important and point to the central role of digital 'connecting' (both local and transnational). Finally, they highlight 'remembering' as a key feature of refugee placemaking and wellbeing. These aspects should not be understood as distinct, but rather as overlapping and interdependent in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers and in the support offered by TSOs.

Belonging

Jess and Helen pointed to the role of placemaking activities in restoring a sense of self-worth for asylum seekers, which they perceived to have been eroded by the hostile environment. Jess described the conditions in the local hotel where asylum seekers had been accommodated:

'In the hotel there are literally security cameras everywhere...even when we were in the dining hall, the manager would come in and tell somebody off because the children are standing on the chair to reach something, you know, because the tables, the chairs and tables are a bit high for them... And she's got this very kind of critical manner. And they would feel really small. Or she would just blast them for putting non-medicine in the fridge or...'

Here Jess suggests that systems of management and control in the hotel have a direct impact on asylum seekers' sense of self-worth. [Watters \(2008:132\)](#) observes that 'in situations where asylum seekers are placed in highly institutionalised settings where they are "provided for" in terms of their basic needs but not allowed to influence aspects of their environment, vulnerability is likely to increase'. In the context of the hotel, surveillance intensifies this sense of vulnerability; as [Foucault \(1977\)](#) argues, the major effect of the 'panoptic gaze' is to induce 'a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' (*ibid.*:201). Jess described how she had organised weekly activities in the park in response:

'We started doing a meeting up in the park every week for games, and sport and craft. And we've been having like 25 people coming to that pretty much week in, week out for the last six months... It's so nice to go to the park, because there's no Big Brother watching you, there's no camera... So yeah, so when we are in our own public space, but

out of the hotel, it's nice because I can set the kind of emotional climate. And so, I can be like, "Welcome, welcome, come". And so, we've got these lovely supportive relationships, they all support each other, and you know, a lot of them translate for each other'.

Jess sees the activities in the park as providing a sense of freedom from the Orwellian ('Big Brother') environment of the hotel. She asserts their shared ownership of the public space of the park, the consequence of regular meetings over a period of six months. As [Rishbeth and Powell \(2013:174\)](#) find, continuity in how first-generation migrants use or experience new landscapes, combined with recent memories of place, 'can support a sense of belonging and legitimacy, especially at a local scale'. Jess suggests that in the park, it is possible for her to set a positive, welcoming climate as the basis for informal support between newcomers, including translating for each other (also see [Phillimore et al., 2018](#); [Ciribuco and O'Connor, 2022](#)).

Helen had established a small community organisation several years previously in response to the growing number of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants with NRPF in her town. She described how her organisation had a weekly drop-in 'café' and ran wellbeing activities, including English lessons:

'It's dropping in, meeting an immigration adviser, meeting other people, having basic English lessons, being able to just socialise. And then during the week, they do some Walk and Talk sessions, and just trying to teach English and make them feel comfortable in the town and make them...well, you know, give them a sense of wellbeing'.

Here Helen links wellbeing to being 'able to just socialise' and feeling 'comfortable in the town'. She later explained how issues of social cohesion had emerged from the use of hotel accommodation:

'Problems do erupt in town in certain places. And the asylum seekers have all been housed in hotels or hostels or that kind of thing in town in one area, which has meant rather a lot of them in one small area, which is not very clever. And I think that has created problems...'

[Diken and Laustsen \(2006:86\)](#) draw on [Agamben \(1998, 2005\)](#) to theorise refugee camps as 'non-places', in which refugees are reduced to a 'bare form of life' and abandoned to a 'state of exception'. The use of hotel accommodation to segregate asylum seekers has the same effect, leading to local violence; as [Foucault \(1977\)](#) suggests, the structuring or ordering of space creates particular norms of conduct. Helen's faith-based organisation plays a mediating role in this space. Research in Northern Ireland similarly points to the mediating role of faith-based organisations and churches in urban settings: 'a minister described how a team from his church had accompanied asylum seekers walking from their hotel to a local ESOL class as they feared harassment on the street' ([Soye, 2022:16](#)). At the same time, however, Helen highlighted the additional impact of socioeconomic exclusion on social cohesion:

'Now, I think a lot of those problems are not just created by the fact that they've housed them all in the same place. It's also created by the whole thing that they can't work, they can't earn money. You know, all the rules around asylum seekers, it hampers the whole idea of them being integrated. If we actually valued them... I think it would totally change the nature of things. They would be seen as valuable in the community, and they would be getting a better self-worth. But I mean, I can't instigate that, you know. So for them to go to the café...'

Here Helen underlines the deeply political nature of place and the complexity of arrival cities ([Wilson, 2022](#)), where spatial and economic inequalities intersect to shape opportunities for placemaking at the societal level. Her narrative draws attention to the limited role TSOs can play in facilitating opportunities for refugee placemaking within a hostile environment: as she laments, she is powerless to change the 'rules' of the asylum system.

Knowing

Uma, Jess, and Abigail all pointed to the significance of ‘knowing’ to placemaking, including legal and cultural knowledge. Uma’s organisation supported unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee minors in the local area. She highlighted the role of legal knowledge in placemaking (Jazeel and McFarlane, 2010), recounting how an unaccompanied Syrian refugee had been (incorrectly) told by a prospective employer that he couldn’t be interviewed because he didn’t have a passport. She went on,

‘So I rang up the head office and sent an email [laughs], you know, to investigate it. But, you know, so many young people probably... experience that kind of thing and just accept it. Because they don’t feel they have rights here, you know. And that is part of that hostile environment, which was sort of, you know, whisked up really, by the whole Brexit hoo-ha, I think, on the ground. So irrespective of the policy direction around what’s legally not allowed, on the ground there’s a lot of hesitation, if you like, an apprehension’.

Achieme (2019:19) suggests that the overall effect of the hostile environment policy has been to create racialised exclusion because ‘public and private actors continue to deploy race and ethnicity as proxies for regular immigration status’. Uma responds to this racialised knowledge by presenting employers with the facts. She added that it was important to educate young refugees and asylum seekers about their rights, noting, ‘It’s not about us determining what’s right for them. It’s about giving them agency and making them feel they have choice and power to make decisions, informed decisions themselves about what they want to do and where they want to go’.

Jess similarly drew attention to a lack of understanding among asylum seekers about their rights in relation to asylum accommodation in the local hotel:

‘There are signs everywhere saying, “If you eat and drink in your room, you may be evicted”. They’re all over the hotel. And yet people are told to eat in their room because they’re not allowed to use the dining hall because of COVID. So all the time you’ve got these signs telling you that you’re on the edge of being evicted, on the edge of losing your status. And if you make a fuss or make a complaint, then that might count against your claim. You know, they think that they might be deported or something. They don’t understand what rights they’ve got in the context they’re in. So there’s a lot of fear around... or even things like we couldn’t use the garden, the manager said, “Oh you can’t eat in the garden because there are foxes”. And I’m like, “Well, the foxes won’t actually hurt you!”. And just little things like that, you know, because the managers manage it in a way that suits their business model rather than suits people’s wellbeing’.

Jess describes how the hotel management uses deliberate mistruths and half-truths about asylum seekers’ rights in the hotel as a biopolitical tool for control. Their behaviour is managed through a neoliberal model that suits the management’s ‘business model’ over asylum seeker ‘wellbeing’. Like Uma, Jess is an important arbiter of knowledge in this context. She underscored the role of the park:

‘Everyone just brings their questions and then, we kind of tell them that now, stuff’s beginning to open up again after the pandemic. So there’s a- if you go to this place, there’s an opportunity there, if you go to that place, you can join in some fun sport there’.

Wessendorf (2022:176) suggests that ‘arrival infrastructures’, including parks, can have vital functions as ‘information hubs’, and that accessing one type of arrival infrastructure can facilitate access to another (e.g. a job or advice centre). Jess acts as an ‘arrival broker’ who provides access to settlement information in this space (Hanhörster and Wessendorf, 2020).

Abigail’s organisation placed asylum seekers and refugees with host families. She noted that while hosts shared knowledge about local

activities and events with their guests, their willingness to get to know their local areas was often shaped by mental health:

‘It’s also access to knowledge. I mean, do people know what’s going on around them? And their hosts might tell them or take them along to things. And do, actually. But some don’t want to do that. So I think it’s quite, it can be a very constrained life... Uh, there’s quite a lot of lurking in rooms. I mean, a lot of people have not great mental health. If you- if you’ve fled a country and you’ve left all your family behind, you’ve then had a horrible journey (because everyone has a horrible journey), you then get here and you think you’re safe, but you then deal with the Home Office for six months to four years. The chances of you coming out with robust mental health are quite small... So there’s quite a lot of people being shut in their rooms because they are you know, clinically depressed, and there’s not much therapy’.

In sharing local knowledge with asylum seekers, host families also support placemaking by acting as ‘arrival brokers’ (ibid.). Abigail emphasises, however, that these efforts are often undermined by mental health issues, which emerge not only from asylum seekers’ experiences of displacement but also from the insecurity of the post-migration context, including the stresses of the asylum system. In doing so she rejects pathologized understandings of displacement and places the focus instead on processes of ‘re-territorialization’ (Brun, 2001).

Contributing

Kirsten, Jess, and Uma felt that it was important to asylum seekers and refugees to be able to contribute to their organisations’ activities. Kirsten’s church provided a community space and partnered with a local charity in running a food bank. She observed,

‘We’ve got a large number of people coming to the food bank who are migrants, asylum seekers or refugees. We don’t always know what someone’s status is, particularly because if we’ve received the referral, it doesn’t say all the details, but we also have the opportunity to talk with people as they come in. It may well be the first time in their life that they’ve ever needed access to something like that... They’ll often say, “What can I do in return?”. And so, we’ve been able to say, “Well look, pop in tomorrow. We’re open from 10 o’clock, come and see, see and meet, and...” We’ve had someone who’s ended up redecorating the space for us. We’ve had people who’ve ended up cooking or cleaning or stacking the food’.

As Darling (2011) suggests, drop-in spaces have political potential. This political potential is evident in the opportunities for reciprocity offered by Kirsten’s church, ‘through which those seeking sanctuary become rightfully present within spaces and engagements of care, not as passive recipients but as active and visible partners’ (ibid.:409).

Unlike Kirsten, Jess had not actively sought to create opportunities for reciprocity through her project in a local park. However, she explained how the asylum seekers taking part in the project had still found ways to contribute:

‘I was trying to do the whole project on my own, and the guys were so keen to step up. So we’ve got this lovely rhythm now where I turn up with my car loaded with tables, chairs, games, bags of sports equipment, and they are there at the boot, unpacking it all, I don’t even need to say anything, unpacking it all for me’.

These individuals resist being made into ‘passive recipients’ of charity (ibid.) by asserting their position as equal partners in Jess’ project. Jess added, ‘They find ways to contribute everywhere. There’s one family who always comes and pick litter. They just walk around the park every day with their litter picker in their bag. Another family go and weed the grounds of the church nearby’. Here Jess points to their ingenuity and creativity in caring for the urban environment in a context where their autonomy and agency have otherwise been stripped away.

Uma's organisation had organised a 'street market' initiative in the local town. Asylum seeker and refugee minors had cooked and distributed food from their home countries in pop-up food stalls. Uma observed,

'...the fact that there were English people paying money for it, you know, enjoying the food, it made them feel so good, you know...that kind of interaction and space where something is very familiar to them, they're the experts and they're sharing their expertise with other people. So they're on the same playing field, they're not seen as the "poor little refugee".'

Moments of familiarity and memory are brought to the fore in the street market initiative. In research on asylum seeker and refugee engagement in urban greenspaces in Sheffield, [Rishbeth and Finney \(2006:289\)](#) suggest that familiarity with particular plants placed individuals 'in the position of experts' and led them to express 'feelings of pride'. Uma's narrative shows how TSOs can channel this familiarity into supporting efforts at placemaking at a societal level: she describes how the young people specifically found joy in engaging with 'English people' from an equal position, thereby challenging dominant narratives of the vulnerable refugee child ([Watters, 2008](#)).

Connecting

Abigail, Helen, and Jess all emphasised the central role of digital connection in refugee placemaking. Abigail's organisation facilitated placements for asylum seekers and refugees with local hosts. She noted the importance of smartphones to the asylum seekers and refugees she worked with:

'The one thing people preserve when they flee is their phone. So this bollocks about, "Oh they can't be a refugee, they've got a smartphone". I mean, it's the one thing...it's the one thing you'd hang on to, and it's the one thing I'd hang on to! All the contacts, all the memories, all the photos, all the access to everything. And everything is digital. They can't apply for anything, they can't get hold of Migrant Help,² they can't access their ASPEN card without that. So it's absolutely critical. And actually I think pretty much all of our hosts have Wi-Fi, it's really rare not to. But when they move on, you know, asylum seeker accommodation doesn't'.

[Gillespie et al. \(2018:6\)](#) describe smartphones for the Syrian and Iraqi refugees in their France-based study as critical to survival on the journey to Europe, but also as 'a place of comfort and connection, solace and sociality—a "mobile home"'. Abigail's words similarly capture the importance of the smartphone for placemaking at the transnational and local levels. The absence of Wi-Fi in asylum accommodation is in stark contrast to the absolute necessity of the smartphone to placemaking. She continued, 'What do you do on thirty-eight pounds a week? [referring to asylum support] Supporting any form of digital habit is quite tricky. It's not cheap and the houses just don't have it. And that was particularly hard, I think, during lockdown'.

Helen also highlighted the need to have access to a digital device for local placemaking: 'It's all online. You've got to have your- everything online, haven't you? And without a computer you can't function. You can't keep walking up to the job centre in order to do that. So, you need to have that'. She described how her organisation was providing computers to asylum seekers in local hotels, but underlined the absence of Wi-Fi as a significant barrier to local and transnational placemaking:

'I can get refurbished laptops. We work with [a local IT charity] and there's a college course where students are taught how to do up laptops. And that works really well. So I can acquire those and...so I

could give them all a laptop, which is what we're doing at the moment. But they haven't got Wi-Fi! So it seems such a basic thing, really, doesn't it? And it would keep them happier! If they had Wi-Fi, they could be learning English. They could be keeping in contact with their families and know that they're safe. And, you know, they're just little things that make a lot of difference.'

Similarly, Jess emphasised the lack of Wi-Fi in the local hotel as a key challenge to local placemaking, noting how this challenge was exacerbated during the COVID-19 lockdowns: 'There isn't Wi-Fi in the hotel. So when everything went online, everybody was stuffed completely. So you couldn't do school applications, you couldn't access...'. She went on,

'Over the years, over the last eighteen months, I've had so many people come to me who are asylum seekers who are tech whizzes, you know, who had sorted out all the IT in their old... They go, "Jess, if you could just get us one of those Amazon boosters, we could get that Wi-Fi," and you know, so many ideas of solutions. But it's just the refusal on behalf of the Home Office. Most people haven't got money, any money, and are destitute. But some people manage to get...I don't know if they can get like family back home to get them some data or something. And then, um, yeah, people found ways, mostly'.

Jess describes her organisation as being powerless to resist the pernicious impact of the hostile environment on refugee placemaking by digital means. At the same time, however, she highlights the expertise and initiative of the asylum seekers she works with in proposing and finding solutions to the problem, sometimes with the help of families in home countries.

Remembering

Uma and Helen described how their organisations facilitated the intersectional engagement of place and memory for the asylum seekers and refugees they worked with. Uma noted,

'I think it comes from relationships and networks of support, but also just a place where they can just be themselves, they don't have to be anything else. And they're not going to be judged because they're speaking their own language or...you know, watching something on YouTube or whatever that's from their own culture or their own identity. And something that gives them comfort, you know. And there aren't many places they can do that, really, with other people'.

Here Uma suggests that it is important for her organisation to provide a place for young asylum seekers and refugees to participate in everyday practices of remembering, noting that this may not be possible in public spaces. She said that an artist in residence had worked with young refugees and asylum seekers at the centre to build on these practices:

'She worked with the young people to develop some really nice art patterns which we use in our main reception area and put up on the walls and things like that. So that they feel like, you know, they could be with that space, if that makes sense, you know, and that it represents their culture and their heritage, the diversity of that culture and heritage. I think that's so important for them'.

While Uma describes 'culture' and 'heritage' in essentialist terms, [Brun \(2001:22\)](#) suggests that 'there may still be a place for what we tend to term essentialist understandings of space, as long as these are included in the way displacement is experienced'. These understandings are integrated into the TSO environment ('being with that space') as young asylum seekers and refugees invest the post-migration context with cultural meaning through creative arts (also see [McIntyre et al., 2022](#)).

In a similar vein, Helen talked about how her organisation had encouraged a sense of continuity between past and present through

² Migrant Help is a national charity which was established by the Home Office to provide advice and guidance to asylum seekers in the UK.

community gardening:

‘One of the things that we discovered very early on was that actually they valued the opportunity to have an allotment that they could call their own and grow their own vegetables. The words came from them really: “This is my little bit of Syria,” “This is my Syrian garden”. And the allotment seems to have been quite a key player in actually having...their own vegetables, their own space to dig, and their own thing to do, and they could do it as they wanted it, nobody was going to tell them how to do it. They could choose what to do there. So much of their lives is about being told what’s going to happen, where you’re going to go, what you’re going to do, and what time you’re going to be there, whereas the garden is different’.

The community gardening organised by Helen’s organisation offers newcomers the opportunity to integrate the past within the present as they bring memories of home to the fore (Rishbeth and Finney, 2006; Biglin, 2020). As Rishbeth et al. (2019:129) find, engagement with greenspace can, for asylum seekers, permit a ‘temporary foregrounding of parts of their identities that had been neglected throughout the migration journey and dismissed by the process of claiming asylum or undergoing resettlement’. The land itself becomes a site for the creative expression of cultural identity.

Discussion and conclusions

A complex, multidimensional picture of refugee placemaking and wellbeing emerges from the interviews with third sector practitioners in southeast England. Belonging, knowing, contributing, connecting, and remembering – according to third sector practitioners, all of these factors are critical to refugee placemaking and wellbeing. Third sector practitioners in the study saw the ‘hostile environment’ as undermining this belonging, knowing, contributing, connecting, and remembering, and accordingly sought to encourage and support these aspects in their everyday work with refugees and asylum seekers.

In the eyes of third sector practitioners, ‘belonging’ is an important aspect of refugee placemaking and wellbeing. This points to the need for more research that recognises the central role of receiving communities in refugee placemaking (Brun, 2001). Future studies could continue to investigate how a shared sense of ‘place’ is shaped by migration-related factors, including organisational efforts, rate and pace of demographic change, patterns of social contact, and media and political discourse (Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2016; Wessendorf, 2020; Phillimore, 2021). Various forms of ‘knowing’, including legal and cultural knowledge, emerge as crucial for refugee placemaking and wellbeing. Further research could explore how different forms of knowledge shape the placemaking experiences of newcomers and hosts alike and examine how TSOs intervene and mediate access to this knowledge. This research also found that ‘contributing’ is a key aspect of refugee placemaking; other studies might build on this finding by exploring how newcomers find creative ways of reciprocating support not only towards each other (as for example in Phillimore et al., 2018) but also towards the work of TSOs.

The findings reveal the importance of digital ‘connecting’ to transnational and local placemaking and show how TSOs support this through various practices within the ‘hostile environment’. At the same time, the study shows how refugees and asylum seekers maintain and forge digital connections on their own, sometimes drawing on the help of families and friends in other countries. These individuals ‘do not move themselves [but] maintain social relations across borders through various forms of communication’ (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004:7). Research could further explore the role of technology, including online platforms and social media, in refugee placemaking in post-migration contexts (Wessendorf, 2022). Finally, third sector practitioners sought to encourage practices of ‘remembering’ among the asylum seekers and refugees they worked with. While previous studies have pointed to the benefits of placemaking as a form of ‘productive nostalgia’ (Blunt,

2003), for example through art (McIntyre et al., 2022) or engagement in green spaces (Rishbeth and Finney, 2006; Biglin, 2020; Rishbeth et al., 2019), TSOs tend to be a background feature in these studies. This study therefore provides insight into the complex ways in which TSOs facilitate engagement with memory as a form of placemaking that supports refugee wellbeing.

In sharing the perspectives of third sector practitioners, this research makes an original contribution to scholarship on placemaking and wellbeing in contexts of forced displacement. The views of third sector practitioners are subjective and embedded in local and institutional contexts. It is possible that interview participants may have simply reproduced organisational discourse rather than sharing their personal perspectives (Mosse, 2005). That said, the seniority and experience of all the interview participants, and their evident concern for the wellbeing of those they worked with, helped to mitigate this risk. The research tells just one side of the story; future studies should aim to hear from refugees and asylum seekers about their own experiences of placemaking as well as their experiences of third sector support. Ethnographic research could also be valuable to put these perspectives in context (see, for example, Darling’s 2011 research on drop-in spaces for asylum seekers in Sheffield). As we have seen, refugee placemaking is political, and remains so – perhaps becomes even more so – at the organisational level. Further research should examine how third sector practitioners make particular kinds of ‘places’ for asylum seekers and refugees in their own discourses and practices. Whatever the case, it is clear that it is ‘not sustainable’ for TSOs to continue to ‘fill the gap’ in government provision (Mayblin and James, 2019:392). There is an unequivocal need for radical reform to the asylum system in the UK and other high-income countries where refugees and asylum seekers struggle to make a ‘place’.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Emma Soye: Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis.
Charles Watters: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

All co-authors have seen and agree with the contents of the manuscript and there is no financial interest to report. We certify that the submission is original work and is not under review at any other publication.

Acknowledgements

We are deeply grateful to the research participants for sharing their time and insights. Many thanks to Dr Anna Wharton, who conducted the systematic mapping of third sector organisations and contacted organisations for interview.

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