

Migration Exchange

at  Global Dialogue

A snapshot of leadership development in the UK refugee and migration sector

Needs, experiences and recommendations

Executive Summary

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This report presents the findings and recommendations from a scoping review of leadership development in the refugee and migration sector in the UK. It builds on a 2018 Migration Exchange review, co-designed with people in the sector, which led to aligned funding for a two-year sector leadership development programme, delivered by Clore and the Centre for Knowledge Equity.¹ This work also benefitted from the guidance and support of a steering group that includes people with lived experience of immigration control, and both providers of and participants in leadership development experiences.

The 2022 research gathered qualitative evidence from leadership development providers and participants. It used this data to explore the methods, aims and resourcing of leadership development in its widest sense, and capture learning from existing programmes.

This scoping exercise found multiple examples of positive and inspiring work to support leadership in the sector. These activities include various types of formal training and support, incidental learning on the job and self-directed leadership development. What unites these diverse leadership development activities is that most are under-resourced.

However, investing in leadership development is important because it not only benefits people who directly receive development opportunities, but also their colleagues. Ultimately, investment in leadership development helps to strengthen the current and future impact of refugee and migration organisations, the people and causes they support, and the whole sector. More focused attention on, long-term support for, and stronger networks among the sector's leadership could deepen and accelerate this impact.

This research also found that the wellbeing of people working in this sector is at risk. This risk is even greater for people with lived experience of migration and systemic or intersectional forms of oppression, making it even more important that these groups are supported to thrive in leadership roles.

This report concludes that a strategic approach to supporting leadership development is urgently needed to sustain the sector's impact, especially given the current, extremely challenging political, economic and social context. Funders, trustees, leaders and supporters of the refugee and migration sector need to act together to address this.

1 The Leading Beyond Borders programme, delivered by Clore Social Leadership and Centre for Knowledge Equity (see case study in section 2g) comprises several different elements and caters to emerging and experienced leaders. It was co-designed with people working in the sector and people with lived experience of the migration system.

Key findings

1. **Coaching, mentoring and action learning were cited as the leadership development activities with the greatest impact.** Other approaches include language-based activities, campaigning, social and community action-based activities.
2. **People particularly value flexible, person-centred approaches to leadership development,** as well as high quality provision and facilitators with lived experience.
3. **Peer learning is highly valued, but ad hoc.** Peer networks worked most successfully when someone had a specific role to organise the logistics and facilitation.
4. **Leadership development needs vary depending on a person's years of experience and level of responsibility.** In particular, CEOs and founders have different needs to others, and particularly value peer networks.
5. **There is a growing commitment in the sector to having more diverse people in formal leadership roles** such as senior management and boards, with a particular focus on racial diversity and lived experience of the migration system.
6. **Further investment is needed to support leaders with lived experience of the migration system,** to sustain existing efforts and address a growing priority shared by funders and providers of leadership support.
7. **Line management and organisational culture are key aspects of leadership development, and managers need more support and training in this area.** Good line management was cited as one of the most influential factors in leadership development, and poor line management can negatively affect mental health and career progression.
8. **Burnout is one of the biggest risks in the sector,** as a result of working in a challenging political environment, a lack of adequate funding, increasing demands on frontline services and the pandemic.
9. **A challenging and negative political environment exacerbates the challenges experienced by people working in the sector,** especially those with lived experience of migration whose day-to-day work may bring back traumatic experiences.

Key recommendations

The full report includes suggestions on how to improve funder and sector practice to strengthen leadership development. From these, we put forward three priority recommendations to sustain leadership development in the UK refugee and migration sector:

1. **Address current gaps in leadership development provision**, including therapeutic support and line management training. Use existing levers to support leadership in the sector, such as expanding funder plus programmes to include coaching, mentoring, action learning or communities of practice. The value of coaching and action learning was consistently mentioned, but prominence and weight was also given to mentoring, and many people reported it had been impactful to their own leadership journeys. Off the shelf training programmes are not necessarily the best way to meet the range of needs people in the sector have; more bespoke development tailored to an individual or organisational context might have more impact.
2. **Support wellbeing and tackle burnout across the sector**, and identify the support organisations need in order to address this themselves and as a sector. Low levels of wellbeing and higher rates of burnout among staff was a strong theme that emerged through this work, but while it came up a lot in the communities of practice and the scoping interviews with people working in organisations, there was a relative absence of it in the interviews with funders. Burnout and a lack of attention to wellbeing presents a risk that, if not addressed, can have a negative impact to the sector as a whole. Some ideas and options on how to tackle this challenge are included in this report, but the topic would benefit from more dedicated attention at a sector-wide level.
3. **Tackle the additional barriers to leadership development experienced by people with lived experience**. To make leadership development meaningful and sustainable, take a careful approach in the designing of development opportunities, when and how they happen, who delivers them and how they respond to the specific needs of individuals. This might involve creating spaces specifically for some groups to help them overcome barriers and to support a more equitable, impactful sector.

This research was commissioned by Migration Exchange in April 2022 and conducted by Julia Slay and Kate Weiler. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as the positions of any of the funding organisations or Migration Exchange.

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