



Centre for Local  
Economic Strategies

# local work

## findings

# Supporting foreign nationals in UK prisons, community cohesion and regeneration: The links

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### Introduction

Cohesive communities, where people feel safe, have a sense of belonging, value diversity, and have a wide range of life choices and opportunities, are essential to the development of truly sustainable communities and as such to regeneration. However, segregation and a lack of cohesion can act as barriers to this.

In this Local Work: *Findings* we will look at how the issue of foreign national in UK prisons relates to the processes of regeneration and neighbourhood renewal. In particular, this local work will look at:

- ❑ The links between community cohesion crime and regeneration;
- ❑ The issue of foreign nationals in UK prisons;

- ❑ The unique needs of foreign inmates
- ❑ Why supporting foreign nationals in UK prisons is an important challenge for practitioners concerned with regeneration, crime and community cohesion;
- ❑ Existing support mechanisms and services for foreign nationals; and
- ❑ Any changes that are needed to further support foreign nationals
- ❑ in UK prisons, their families and their communities.

This briefing draws on findings from recent work undertaken by CLES for the Ocean Somali Community Association (OSCA) in evaluating their Young Offenders and Family Support project, which offers support to young Somalis in prison and their families, and other recent literature.

For the purpose of the briefing foreign national prisoners are defined as anyone not classed as a British national, however the majority of foreign national prisoners come from countries outside of the EU.

With an increasingly diverse population and problems of polarisation and segregation, community cohesion has risen up the political and policy agendas. Indeed, this focus on community cohesion has also been amplified by the race riots in Oldham and Bradford in 2001, the terrorist attacks of 2005 and increased ethnic diversity as a result of greater mobility of black and Asian communities; economic migration from EU and other countries; the dispersal of refugee and asylum seekers; and confusion around the idea of multiculturalism. The importance of cohesion in the development of sustainable communities is reflected at the national policy level where central government has introduced a number of measures to tackle the challenges surrounding cohesion and integration.

At the national level, the Commission on Integration and Cohesion<sup>1</sup> was set up in June 2006 to co-ordinate community cohesion activity. From 2007, the Commission has joined up the activities of the Commission for Racial Equality and the Disability Rights Commission amongst others to ensure that local areas can make the most of the benefits delivered by increasing diversity but will also consider how they can respond to the tensions it can sometimes cause. The Commission has a remit to develop practical approaches that build communities own capacity to prevent problems including those caused by segregation.

The neighbourhood renewal unit is also committed to ensuring that the

process of renewal; enhances community cohesion in deprived neighbourhoods.

Reducing levels of re-offending is a key part of reducing crime and fear of crime, and this can be addressed by appropriate rehabilitation and support within and after leaving prison. Such support is also crucial to fostering community cohesion, which in turn can help to reduce re-offending and fear of crime by improving inter-racial and inter-generational trust and facilitating communities to support ex-offenders as a way of supporting the wider community as a whole. In light of recently acknowledged increases in the numbers of foreign national prisoners in UK jails, and the growing diversity of many areas of the country, reducing levels of re-offending among foreign national prisoners is a key part of developing truly cohesive communities. Yet for many years, foreign national prisoners have been largely ignored, and it is only recently that they are starting to be seen as a group with their own unique support needs.

### **Emergence of the issue**

The issues of foreign national prisoners in the UK came to the forefront of public attention in 2006 when it emerged that since 1999, 1023 had been released from prison without any consideration given to their deportation or removal from the country<sup>2</sup>, and to all extents and purposes, were effectively 'missing'.

The Home Office, seemingly compelled to undertake harsh actions to dilute public reaction, immediately transferred around 200 foreign nationals from open prisons to closed prisons. Many foreign nationals expecting to move to open prisons, were also told this had been cancelled<sup>3</sup>. Yet the emergence of this

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Commission on Integration and Cohesion visit: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1501520>

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<sup>2</sup> Home Office, 2006, Home Secretary's Statement on Foreign Prisoners

<sup>3</sup> The Guardian, Second Offence, May 31 2006,

scandal also resulted in unprecedented attention being focussed on a group of prisoners who for many years had largely been ignored. For the first time, the neglect and lack of support facing many foreign national prisoners within British prisons, our inability to meet their particular needs and to provide appropriate support, was being uncovered.<sup>4</sup>

### The rise in foreign national prisoners

In just over a decade the number of foreign national prisoners in England and Wales has increased by 68% from 3,446 in 1993 to 10,834 in September 2006. This compares to an increase of just 12% of British nationals<sup>5</sup>. Foreign national prisoners in England and Wales now account for 13% of the total prison population and come from 172 different countries<sup>6</sup>. Jamaicans make up by far the biggest single group, accounting for 1,564 of all foreign nationals in custody. The second biggest group are Nigerians, followed by nationals from Ireland, Pakistan, Turkey and then Somalia<sup>7</sup>. Our research highlighted that in Feltham Young Offenders Institute in December 2006, there were 30 Somali males serving sentences out of a total of 160 foreign national offenders. The Somali group is the largest single community of the foreign national population in Feltham, and has been since 2003.

The growth in the number of foreign national prisoners can be explained in part by the increase of the foreign national population in the UK from

3.5% in 1996 up to 6% in 2006<sup>8</sup> (this is the % of the workforce who are foreign nationals - getting information about the entire foreign national population is very difficult), and also increased sentencing lengths for drug offences, robbery and violence, the three crimes most likely to be committed by male foreign nationals.

Offence Group	Male	Female	Total
Violence against the person	971	35	1006
Sexual offence	435	0	435
Burglary	238	8	246
Robbery	448	11	459
Theft and handling	220	16	336
Fraud and forgery	309	46	355
Drug offences	2,383	533	2916
Other	499	26	425
Not recorded	48	2	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>5551</b>	<b>677</b>	<b>6228</b>

Source: Home Office (31<sup>st</sup> December 2003) Sentenced foreign national prison population

Indeed compared to British prisoners, three times as many foreign nationals are serving sentences for drug offences. This amounts to one in four foreign male prisoners and four out of five of all foreign women prisoners. These sentences are mainly for drug importation, with foreign women in particular acting as 'mules' to bring drugs into the country. The motivation for this is often to support their family, pay for education and

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/crime/article/0,,1786377,00.html>

<sup>4</sup> Solomon, E. 2006, Foreign Prisoners, Inside, the National Monthly Newspaper for Prisoners

<sup>5</sup> Home Office, 2006, Home Secretary's Statement on Foreign Prisoners

<sup>6</sup> HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006, Foreign National Prisoners: A thematic review

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, G (2006) Foreign Prisoner Numbers Soaring

form <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/08/19/npris19.xml>

<sup>8</sup> Audit Commission, 2007, Crossing borders: Responding to the local challenges of migrant workers, London

medical care or as a result of poverty<sup>9</sup>.

### **OSCA young offenders and family support project**

The Ocean Somali Community Association (OSCA) is a voluntary organisation that was established in 2001 by Somali residents on the Ocean Estate, Tower Hamlets, to strengthen communication and linkages between service providers and the Somali community, and improve the quality of life for the Somali community in the UK. OSCA were concerned about a growing number of Somali young people involved in, or at risk of, criminal activities and antisocial behaviour, and the high rate of school exclusion, and truancy, as well as unemployment among young Somalis within Tower Hamlets. As such, they established the Young offenders And Family Support project to:

- Work with Somali young people and their families within the Criminal Justice System, providing support, mediation and practical guidance and help for when they leave prison
- Provide a range of preventative activities and workshops for those at risk of getting involved with criminal activities.

A key strand of activity involves supporting Somalis in Young Offender's Institutions or in prison, as it was recognised that as foreign nationals, young Somalis face a range of challenges that differ from those faced by British citizens. The project aimed to work with Somali prisoners to provide pastoral support; ensure that prisons are delivering on basic requirements such as providing information in Somali; offer practical guidance with regards to options for when they

leave prison; identify gaps in service provision; and support for families - helping to arrange visits or accompanying families to the prison or institution to the prison.

CLES Consulting's research sought to evaluate the project, through undertaking consultation with project staff, local agencies and project beneficiaries, but also evidence the need for its continuation, through interviews with Foreign National coordinators at prisons, the Youth Offending Service and Tower Hamlets Police.

### **Research findings**

This section of the report combines our findings about the needs of Somali prisoners, and findings of research undertaken by the HM Inspectorate of prisons and the Prison Reform Trust on foreign national prisoners. The findings highlight the needs that are either specific to, or greater for foreign national prisoners, rather than providing an overview of concerns of all prisoners. The research also highlighted the extreme difficulties the project came across with regards to setting up support groups for Somalis in prison, as a result of red tape and complex legislative requirements.

### **The needs of foreign national prisoners**

#### ***Family Contact***

Foreign national prisoners are more likely to have greater needs in relation to maintaining family contact and isolation than British national prisoners, meaning mental health needs can be greater. Stress and mental health issues can particularly affect mothers imprisoned in the UK (often because of drug importation), whose families are abroad, and feel unable to fulfil their role as parents to children in another country<sup>10</sup>. The

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<sup>9</sup> HM Prison Service (2006) Strategy and Resource Guide for the Resettlement of Women prisoners

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<sup>10</sup> HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006, Foreign National Prisoners: A thematic review

HM Inspectorate report identified that over a third of foreign national prisoners interviewed for their research, had not had a visit since arriving in prison and that foreign nationals had significantly more problems keeping in touch with their families than UK nationals<sup>11</sup>. This lack of contact could be for a range of reasons:

- ❑ **Family living abroad:** The families of foreign national prisoners are more likely to be living abroad. Prisoners are provided with one free five minute international phone call a month, however this is largely in lieu of visits – as such, this could involve choosing between which family members they stay in touch with and whether to receive visits from people in the UK.
- ❑ **Lack of information:** 18% of foreign nationals interviewed by the HM Inspectorate did not know what their visit entitlement was<sup>12</sup>.
- ❑ **Families unable to come to prison:** For some foreign national families, visiting a relative in prison can be a near impossible experience. Language problems can mean understanding visiting times or procedure is difficult, and actually getting to the prison is challenging. Furthermore for some foreign national women, visiting a prison alone can be a daunting experience.
- ❑ **Taboos:** Our research found that there is a high level of shame associated with crime amongst the Somali community. As such, people will try to keep their criminal activities hidden from their families, leading to a breakdown in family relations. We came across several cases

where young people were serving short sentences, but had kept it hidden from their family. This leads to concern from the family, and a lack of support for the offender upon leaving prison.

### *Immigration*

Foreign national prisoners tend to face deportation at the end of the sentence if they have been in prison for over a year, regardless of whether there was any mention of deportation in court with regards to their case. However, because of a failure by authorities to always monitor and make arrangements for those who have been recommended for deportation, shockingly, some foreign nationals will remain in jail even after they have completed their sentence<sup>13</sup>.

Indeed immigration law in prisons is a major area of ignorance, confusion and concern. Courts do not communicate effectively with prisons, and information about cases is rarely related to the prisoner themselves. Furthermore there is very little specialist support for foreign national prisoners to obtain, and prison staff rarely have the legal skills or knowledge to provide it<sup>14</sup>. Immigration uncertainties can lead to ongoing anxieties for the prisoner and also have a considerable impact on the prison's ability to prepare prisoners for release and resettlement. As a result, this makes resettlement in the community more difficult and can lead to re-offending.

### *Language*

The HM Inspectorate report highlighted that language is one of the key problems indicated by prisoners<sup>15</sup> and our research

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<sup>11</sup> HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006, Foreign National Prisoners: A thematic review

<sup>12</sup> HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006, Foreign National Prisoners: A thematic review

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<sup>13</sup> Lyons, J. (2006). The foreigners still locked up in our jails are the other scandal  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1761983,00.html>

<sup>14</sup> HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006, Foreign National Prisoners: A thematic review

<sup>15</sup> HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006, Foreign National Prisoners: A thematic review

identified a lack of language support for Somali and other foreign national prisoners. This is partly due to a lack of provision and skills, but also due to a lack of prisoner awareness. Indeed 90% of foreign prisoners are not making regular use of translation services and as such, struggle to access accurate legal and immigration advice during their sentence<sup>16</sup>.

Language problems can compound isolation and can mean that basic provisions for prisoners, such as showers, are missed. Language problems can be associated with almost all other problems in prisons, including lack of basic information, poor understanding of legal services, immigration, prison rules and procedures, food and dietary requirements, poor health, and issues around respect, culture and ethnicity.

### ***Cultural needs***

Foreign national prisoners can have specific needs related to their culture and/or religion, that prisons are unequipped to meet. This could include specific dietary or religious requirements. The Foreign National Coordinators at the Prisons felt that an in-depth knowledge of the cultures of inmates was important, in helping understand specific needs. One example highlighted was an understanding of tribal aspects and the clan system in Somalia. This can have a significant bearing on Somalis in the UK, gang culture and how people will interact with each other.

### **Support provided by OSCA**

Through the Young Offenders and Family Support project, OSCA has supported over 12 young Somalis in prison. The offenders have ranged from 17 to 25 years of age and been imprisoned in H.M. Brixton, H.M. Pentonville, H.M. Plundeston, H.M. Holloway and H.M. Feltham Young

Offenders Institute. This has involved visiting inmates in prison, providing information about employment and training opportunities for when they leave, (this is a particular issue, as often preparation courses for prisoners will only be conducted in English and as such, foreign nationals who do not speak the language proficiently will not benefit), keeping prisoners up to date with how their sentence is progressing, helping them gain information about any deportation issues, and accompanying families on visits to the prison.

The project also provides mentoring support to young offenders on their release from prison, helping them to consider and take forward options for the future, such as training, education or employment. The project also delivers a range of diversionary activities which young people leaving prison are encouraged to attend, including football and residential. Leaving prison can be a very hard time for young people, confidence can be low, employment may be hard to find and secure, and relationships within the family or local community may be poor. Through involvement in the Young Offenders project, young people can start to regain a structure to their week – attending football sessions/training and meeting new friends.

The Young Offenders project has also tried to set up Somali support groups in prisons, to provide more regular pastoral care, however this has been hindered by red tape and legislative issues in prisons. Nonetheless, the increased focus on foreign national prisoners, and the greater capacity of Foreign National Coordinators, should mean that working with external support agencies to develop cultural support groups will be more feasible in the future.

### **Support available to foreign national prisoners**

Across the country, 108 prisons in England and Wales now have a

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<sup>16</sup> HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006, Foreign National Prisoners: A thematic review

member of staff assigned to the role of foreign national coordinator. However the number of hours they are able to spend in this role is usually dependent on the number of foreign national prisoners and any other responsibilities that they have<sup>17</sup>. Our research highlighted that with prisoners from over 170 different countries, foreign national coordinators find it impossible to have a good understanding of the specific cultural needs of each group and cannot spend time getting to know their unique needs. As such engagement with external support agencies is essential in preparing prisoners for the end of their sentence.

With regards to overall support for foreign national prisoners, the HM Inspectorate Thematic review concluded that there was no effective and consistent approach that ensures proper support to foreign nationals when in prison. However, some examples do exist where prisons are showing innovation in the care they provide foreign prisoners:

#### **HMP Wandsworth:**

##### **Immigration workshops and co-opting trusted prisoners as foreign national orderlies**

HMP Wandsworth employ an information and advice worker who holds regular immigration workshops offering specialist advice and support to foreign national prisoners who have immigration problems<sup>18</sup>. The prison also uses the innovative method of co-opting trusted prisoners to be foreign national "orderlies". These orderlies visit newly arrived foreign nationals, pass on information, identify those in greatest need and visit them regularly, keep lists of inmates who can be interpreters, and help to manage the foreign national group lists<sup>19</sup>

ers/2004.htm

<sup>19</sup> Sing Bui, H, 2004. Going the distance – Developing effective policy and practice with foreign national prisoners, Prison Reform Trust

#### **HMP Brixton: Foreign national coordinator**

Foreign national prisoners make up 40% of the prison population at Brixton. The foreign national coordinator makes contact with all newly arrived foreign national prisoners, and has established good links with the Immigration Service and Detention Advisory Service who visit regularly to help those with immigration problems<sup>20</sup>. A number of foreign national support groups are now run by external organisations, and black history discussion groups run weekly and fortnightly advice service sessions<sup>21</sup>.

#### **Conclusion**

Our research has shown that equality of treatment in prisons is not about treating everybody the same, it is acknowledging that certain groups such as foreign national prisoners have different needs and providing appropriate support to address these needs. Prisons, working with external support organisations, need to focus on dealing with family contact, immigration and language, in particular offering immigration advice, legal advice, translation facilities, English classes and better preparation for release<sup>22</sup>.

Though some prisons are showing examples of good practice, recent research has highlighted that the levels of self-harming amongst foreign national prisoners is actually increasing<sup>23</sup>. An indication that there is a lot still to be done. It is imperative that precise arrangements for the end of

<sup>20</sup> HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2006, Unannounced full follow up inspection of HMP Brixton, Home Office

<sup>21</sup> The Butler Trust Award winners, 2005, [http://www.thebutlertrust.org.uk/award\\_winners/2005.htm](http://www.thebutlertrust.org.uk/award_winners/2005.htm)

<sup>22</sup> Lyons, J. (2006). The foreigners still locked up in our jails are the other scandal <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1761983,00.html>

<sup>23</sup> HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2007, Foreign National Prisoners: A follow up report

sentences are in place for foreign prisoners as soon as possible, and that information is effectively communicated between the court, the prisons and the prisoner, so that the prisoner can plan for and be helped with their departure.

For prisons and external support organisations, providing appropriate support to foreign national prisoners, their families and their communities is important not only with regards to human rights, but also to address re-offending, stem the rapid growth of foreign nationals in prison, and ensure that communities are well placed to support foreign national prisoners on their release.

In conclusion, our research has highlighted the need for external support groups, such as the Somali Young Offenders project, to be able to 'bridge the gap' and provide the support that foreign national prisoners need, not only to ensure they receive fair treatment in prison but, also to facilitate successful re-integration into the community.

For CLES, this reintegration is central to building cohesive, confident and crime free communities and thus explains our interest in such issues. By supporting Foreign National Prisoners appropriately and effectively, prisons and support organisations can aid the development of strong, positive and sustainable communities which are integral to regeneration.

**Local Work** is one of a series of regular policy reports produced by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES). CLES is a not-for-profit think doing organisation, consultancy and network of subscribing organisations specialising in regeneration, economic development and local governance. CLES also publishes Bulletin, Rapid Research and bespoke Briefings on a range of issues.

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