**Title:** What about the migrants? An exploration of organisational change in an asylum seeker and refugee voluntary sector organisation

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**Abstract:** Given the increased financial and social threats to the voluntary sector in the UK since the 2008 recession, a historical approach is vital to understanding organisational longevity and adaptability. This paper uses a medium-sized asylum seeker and refugee organisation as a case study to illustrate how policy shifts regarding migration and the voluntary sector presented key survival challenges and opportunities. The study challenges the notion that expanding activities inevitably causes mission drift, as the organisation's core social justice ethos provided continuity in its response to external threats. It also emphasises the importance of a strongly embedded organisational culture in the work of staff and leadership, enabling adaptability to the evolving needs of marginalised groups and the broader external environment.

**Key Words:** Migrant; Asylum Seeker; Organisational Change; Organisational Culture; Service Delivery

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**Introduction**

UK voluntary sector organisations (VSOs), particularly at the community level, are crucial for providing services to those marginalised from state support. For asylum seekers and refugees, VSOs are often the first providers offering a wide range of support (Calò et al. 2021) such as offering emotional support, connecting to provisions and advocating for their statutory rights (Käkelä et al., 2023), yet VSOs working with these groups are often under-research and under-theorised (Mayblin and James, 2019).

The UK asylum seeker and refugee voluntary sector mainly comprises large national organisations (e.g., Refugee Action, Refugee Council, Migrant Helpline) and smaller refugee community organisations (RCOs), which form the majority of the sector and emerged largely due to 1990s government policy shifts (Griffiths et al., 2005; Zetter et al., 2005; Cullen, 2009; Phillimore and Goodson, 2010; McGhee et al., 2016). Recently, smaller RCOs have become more professionalised (Terry, 2017), leading to the growth of medium-sized organisations. Understanding UK refugee and asylum seeker policy, alongside voluntary sector funding and structure, is crucial for understanding affecting these VSOs.

Studies suggest small RCOs struggle to compete for contract-based funding due to lack of capacity, internal systems or preexisting relationships with funders (Dayson et al., 2018). However, research often focuses on larger, successful VSOs who receive those contracts, or small, community-level migrant-led organisations who do not (Cullen, 2009; Phillimore and McCabe, 2010; McGhee et al., 2016). More research on medium sized organisations caught between extremes (De Jong and Atac, 2017) could offer a more balanced perspective on VSOs and their environments in change management processes.

This article examines organisational change in a medium-sized asylum seeker and refugee VSO over four decades through a historical analysis of its origins and trajectory. This narrative reflects broader social, political, economic and migration changes since the 1980s. This study analyses the organisation’s continuity and change over time in relation to migrant and voluntary sector policy, examining key milestones for the VSO resulting from internal and external pressures.

This paper first outlines the policy context and external challenges faced by refugee and asylum VSOs from the 1980s to 2020. It then explores organisational change dynamics, particularly organisational agency. The historical methods (document analysis and oral histories) are outlined, followed by key insights from different historical periods as vignettes of the organisational response to external factors. Finally, the paper provides insight for VSOs on balancing external pressures whilst maintaining core identity as well as when to change and when to maintain organisational activities.

This historical approach offers valuable lessons, especially considering current threats to VSOs like the Covid-19 pandemic’s fallout, cost of living crisis, and reoccurring financial instability. The findings highlight the importance of agency and VSOs flexibility in delivering adaptable, person-centred services that meet evolving service user needs driven by external forces. Another key insight relates to the importance of sustaining a strong, core organisational identity and work culture to withstand frequent external challenges. These factors challenge the notion of VSOs as passive victims of mission drift (Chapman et al., 2008).

**Migration and voluntary sector policy landscape**

During the 1980s, UK asylum policy was relatively welcoming to asylum seekers, due to low claim numbers, allowing them similar rights to UK citizens (e.g. accessing benefits, housing, right to work) (Carey-wood, 1997). The 1990s saw more people coming from conflict areas (e.g. former Soviet Union, Somalia, Iraq) leading to an increase in asylum seeker claims which was coupled with processing delays. This fuelled a rapid growth in two contradictory viewpoints regarding asylum seekers. Firstly, stricter limits on appealing asylum decisions and termination of all mainstream welfare support for asylum seekers applying in-country or in the process of appeal. Secondly, policy changes functioned as a deterrent with the removal of welfare support.

These changes fostered the misconception of asylum seekers as ‘bogus’ and ‘undeserving’ of support (Sales, 2002; Stewart and Mulvey, 2014) as well as welfare-dependent due to work restrictions (Mayblin and James, 2019). From the mid-1990s, asylum seekers and refugees faced social exclusion and restrictions from mainstream benefits, housing, and labour (Stevens, 2001; Zetter and Pearl 2000). Some scholars argue that the increasingly restrictive UK asylum policy regime has created a rising demand for VSO welfare services, leading to a substantial increase in VSOs supporting destitute asylum seekers and refugees (Mayblin and James 2019).

The 1990s also brought renewed partnership with the voluntary sector in service delivery, shifting funding from grants to contracting out statutory services to private and voluntary sector providers (Buckingham, 2009; Wilding, 2010). The greater coordination of services between the public and ‘third’ sector was reinforced with the introduction of ‘compacts’ in each UK nation (Kendall, 2000; Lewis, 2005). Whilst this led to initiatives to build capacity within the sector, this also meant an attempt to create homogeneity and consistency across VSOs (Carmel and Harlock, 2008).

The discourse around deserving and undeserving migrants deepened in the early 2000s. This meant integration focused policy for ‘deserving’ refugees with welfare and employment rights (Phillimore, 2012; 2015) contrasting sharply with the ‘underserving’ asylum seeker narrative. Asylum seeker policy focus on ‘deterrence’ (Williams, 2006) which left many struggling to meet basic needs (Dwyer and Brown, 2005). Whilst refugee integration services such as the Refugee Challenge Fund[[1]](#endnote-1), funded by the government but contracted out by Refugee Action to smaller organisations (Phillimore, 2012), fostered a support environment for refugees compared to the stringent measures faced by asylum seekers.

In 2012, the Coalition Government Home Secretary declared the intention to make the UK a ‘hostile environment’ for irregular immigration (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021), limiting public funds for organisations and individual migrants (Doyle, 2014), and increasing fees and checks on right to access services (e.g. introduction of ‘health surcharges’). All with the intention of driving down net migration numbers. For example, RIES was abolished in 2011 (Doyle, 2014); central government funding and support is minimal; and cash support is set at £39.63 per person, per week, allowing just £5.66 a day for food, sanitation, and clothing. This led a growth in undocumented, destitute migrants with no recourse to public funds (Randall, 2015), increasing VSO reliance for this group (Caruso et al, 2023).

Whilst at the same time, the ‘Big Society’ introduced by the Coalition Government replaced the previously centralised relationships between VSOs and the state (Milbourne and Cushman, 2015). Funding shifted to target initiatives and modes of delivery which favoured larger providers (LBF, 2016). This crowded out smaller, specialist groups, including those run by, and serving already marginalised communities (Dayson et al., 2018).

**Dynamics of Organisational Change**

Given the major political, economic, and social shifts that have influenced the environment in which refugee and asylum seeker VSOs operate, it is important to consider how they address wider external events which often determine both the resources available and the demands on service. Awareness of the nuance of the context of VSOs is essential to understanding change, as organisations both shape and are shaped by their environments (Milligan and Fyfe, 2004).

One way to discuss this is using an evolutionary theory of change (van De Ven and Poole, 1995). Organisations compete for in a cycle of continuous variation and selection (van de Ven and Poole, 1995). This ‘natural selection’ model suggests that organisations best fitting the needs of the environment are selected, contrasting with the ‘resource dependence model’, which focuses on internal decision-making around adaption for better resource acquisition from the environment (Aldrich and Pfeffer, 1976). This is akin to what Bourdieu would describe as the ‘fields’, the structured spaces shaping relationships between organisations and power dynamics.

To navigate environmental changes, organisations may adapt or crease processes (Kloot, 1997). These responses can be seen to be reactive and proactive depending on the lens of analysis. Much VSO literature frames responses to the external environment in a reactive way (Acheson, 2014; Terry, 2017), such as shifts in organisational structures and processes within VSOs described as ‘formalisation’, ‘professionalisation’ or ‘bureaucratisation’ (Ellis Paine and Hill, 2016). In response to contract culture, VSOs shifted from ad hoc informal structures to more formalised, ‘business-like’ approaches (Chad, 2014). In short, organisations professionalise to adapt to changing environment (Bennett, 2008; Crouch, 2011).

The broad assumptions about shifts in organisational form amongst VSOs can be partially explained by a default macro-approach to institutional analysis which assumes uniformity in how VSOs respond to external pressures (Ramanath, 2009). This leads to the assumption of ‘isomorphic’ homogeneity of VSOs responses to external pressures (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) and an assumption of reactivity. What may look to be purely reactive change from the outside may fail to consider the important internal, proactive decision-making processes. Walk et al. (2004) therefore recommend a more nuanced framework for understanding conceptualisations of VSO change depending on the scale and nature of response: tuning (anticipatory, incremental change), adaption (reactive, incremental change), reorientation (anticipatory, comprehensive change) and re-creation (reaction comprehensive change). These strategies link to the idea of ‘organisational learning’ whereby decision-makers assess the external context and adapt the organisation to best fit with the environment (Senge, 1990; Argyris, 1997; Kloot 1997). This can involve adaptation whilst retaining key organisational features as opposed to fundamental shifts in the conception of the organisation (Senge, 1990; Argyris, 1997; Kloot 1997). The fit between the organisation and the environment depends on the stability and complexity of each (Lengnick-Hall and Beck, 2005). It is therefore important to also consider the agency of the organisation and those who make decisions within the organisation.

The organisational agency of VSOs in response to external events is beginning to receive academic attention, such as advocacy work in relation to asylum seeker and refugee rights (De Jong and Atac, 2017) and thus, provides an opportunity to explore the contribution of informal organisational practices within organisations as part of those responses (Piacentini, 2014). It is also essential to consider the origins, nature, and activities of organisations which lead to more micro-level variation (Taylor and Lansley, 2000; Ramnath, 2009). Organisational culture plays a key role in shaping the success and scale of change. This also links to Bourdieu’s idea of habitus, or social norms and traditions within an organisation, is particularly important. The repetition of activities results in them becoming ingrained habits, routines and even rituals with organisations. These practices are an important aspect of meaning-making and creation of culture (Ospina and Foldy, 2010).

Agency is crucial in how organisations manage their ‘structural constraints’ (MacKenzie et al., 2012). Leadership drives planned change (Jacklin-Jarvis and Rees, 2022), setting a strong vision, ensuring staff buy-in, and fostering a strong culture through activities, rituals and processes which allow change to stick, particularly when drawing on ideas of collective leadership in which ownership of the process is shared (Terry, Rees and Jacklin-Jarvis, 2020). This is crucial in VSOs who rely heavily on human resources to achieve objectives which requires involvement in decision making and a certain degree of bottom-up leadership to ensure intrinsic motivation for staff (Hack-Polay and Igwe, 2019) as well as belonging and empowerment (Knapp et al., 2019). The human resources of a determines the services that can be provided in terms of information and advice on a range of issues as well as cultural and social support (Piacentini, 2014). This is owing to specialised expertise, local knowledge and individuals who share identities and languages with service users (De Jong, 2019); their ‘cultural capital’ according to Bourdieu. Migrants often face a combination of language and trust issues when interacting with statutory services (Cambridge and Williams, 2004). This means VSOs often serve as trusted spaces that address these issues and offer alternative provision to that offered by statutory providers (Wren, 2007; Vickers, 2016). VSOs can more effectively interact with the relevant communities, building bridges and thereby building ‘social capital’ (Harris and Young, 2010; Jacklin-Jarvis and Cole, 2019); this is particularly important for migrant integration (Phillimore, 2015).

Researchers argue that the shift in towards contracted services moved VSOs away from their original purpose, values, and mission (Chapman et al., 2008; Buckingham: 2009). They argue that by trying to convert social and cultural capital into economic capital it could lead to ‘mission drift.’ The degree to which this occurs is widely debated (Macmillan, 2010). Arguments for mission drift state that the organisational focus shifts towards survival at the cost of prioritising service users (Chapman et al., 2008). Whilst those who argue against state that VSOs continue to maintain a strong core mission in delivering activities despite larger changes (Chew and Osborne, 2008; Nevile, 2010).

The above arguments primarily frame mission drift as being driven by resource dependency impacting the organisation’s service provision. Cornforth (2014: 4) argues that mission drift can manifest in multiple ways in the visible (e.g., mission, strategy, objectives) and the less visible (e.g., working practices, service delivery). This then may be another case of ‘isomorphic convergence’ seen from the macro viewpoint with an emphasis on resource scarcity (Rees et al., 2024). However, there is limited research that looks at VSO agency (Acheson, 2014) or the interplay between internal and external concepts that influence organisational change. For example, it may be advantageous to have a flexible approach to the organisation’s mission, whilst still maintaining a client focus, as mission ‘rigidity’ could inhibit the organisation’s survival in uncertain times (Bennett, 2008); this is a ‘dynamic’ understanding of organisational missions (Berlan, 2018). To successfully maintain mission flexibility a strong strategic direction, governance and reflexivity are required. Taylor Gooby (2008) argues that there must be a focus on the rational aspects of agency as well as the role of social values, mission, and emotions to understand how actors and organisations make sense of external pressures in organisational responses.

This article examines stages in the history of the organisation that show how external events informed the process of change in each period considering both the norms and routines at these different points and the historical trajectory of the organisation itself. It argues that exploring both internal and external influences can offer an insightful, robust, and complete explanation on how organisational change takes place over time. By looking at these two influences, this article seeks to address: what agency did the organisation have in how it changed or did not over time? With key sub-questions around what priority was given to external influences within the organisation and what were the driving internal dynamics that influenced change?

**Methods**

This article focuses on one case study of an asylum seeker and refugee VSO with the pseudonym ‘Migrant Hub.’ As this article seeks to understand the process of continuous change management focusing on one case in-depth allowed for clear exploration of the micro and macro influences on the direction of the organisation over time to provide a holistic perspective (Kellock Hay et al., 2001). Specific criteria were used to select this case: operating throughout the period of policy change; focusing on migrant issues; using multiple funding sources; and being an established organisation that underwent a series of organisational changes (e.g., structure, size etc.). These criteria ensured that the case study could provide insights into experiences of other medium sized community-based refugee organisations navigating changing policy environments.

The data for this article came from three key sources: archival documents, published annual reports and financial records, and oral histories. Historical documents were gathered from a local authority archive which included: committee meeting minutes, newsletters and internal correspondence which highlighted the aims and purposes, key activities, and funding sources for the case. These documents focused on the founding of the organisation in the 1980s through the 1990s, providing understanding of the organisation’s emergence including the values, rationale and premise that shaped it. Early trends from the historical documents mentioned above were compared to published annual reports of activities in the 2000s through the 2010s allowing tracking over time of the activities, mission, and funding sources. Annual financial reports available online through Companies House, from incorporation to the end of the 2010s, further aided understanding of activities and finances over time, filling in gaps in the archival and published records whilst supporting the analysis of trends. This provides an overview of the organisation’s activities from the founding to just before the start of the covid-19 pandemic. Fifteen oral histories were conducted in-person with internal and external stakeholders focused on the organisation’s activities and history. Respondents included: members of staff (directors, deputy directors, and staff); board members; and local authority staff. These discussions provided key internal and external stakeholders’ perspectives not available through document analysis alone. Respondents were selected to cover a variety of experiences of front-line staff, management, and external partners, who also could provide insight into the organisation’s history. These sources were combined to form a robust dataset which captures in detail the organisational journey. Historical timelines were created to outline activities, funding, staffing, and management structures in each decade as well as to note changes from previous decades. Thematic coding, drawing on Bruan and Clarke (2019), was conducted using an informal code book to explore the interplay between internal and external pressures. This allowed identification of a variety of sub-themes relevant to the organisational journey and relevant exemplars (Flick, 2002), including: partnerships, funding, mission / objectives, service provision and relationships.

This article takes this mixed methods approach that combines the ideas of ‘history’ that is completed in the past to be combined with the idea of ‘memory’ which is an interpretation of the past in the present (Decker et al). The history perspective involves a combination of social documents, internally focused to the organisation, and narrative sources which address a wider audience and show how the organisation was making sense of events in the past (Decker et al). This means that there is both an internal and external perspective of the organisation articulated by the document, triangulated with retrospective organisational history and memory through oral histories which reconstruct past events.

Using a historical approach and dataset naturally entails limitations, mostly relating to document survival. Bias and subjective interpretation are also an issue, for example when participants are retrospectively relaying their perspective, or where document selection has already occurred prior to transfer to the archive. By using a combination of documents and oral histories, this methodological approach can overcome some limitations of historical work and increase validity by testing assumptions (Stake, 2005). It also allows for triangulation of the interpretation of the archival and published documents by including interviewees’ views, beliefs, experiences, and interpretations (Mason, 2002) of events and what processes had influenced organisational change (memory). Additionally, this richness of data and historical approach both contribute more broadly to voluntary sector research.

**Findings**

‘Migrant Hub’ started in the early 1980s with an initial financial endowment from a religious charitable trust foundation. ‘Migrant Hub’ supported political refugees and exiled people living locally at a time when migrant policy focused on integration. The organisation provided community groups a space to connect and hold activities focused on solidarity. The variety of these groups’ experiences required ‘Migrant Hub’ to negotiate the different factions and created a culture that was *“welcoming”*, *“trusting”* and *“careful”* [Trustee]. The organisation formed from a combination of community groups with cultural knowledge and capital in the community as well as a director with a complementary background, expertise, and social capital in the larger social justice area. These actors came together to develop the organisation and build on this cultural and social capital, allowing it to negotiate changes in migration and voluntary sector policy.

*1990s Period of Transition*

In the early 1990s, ‘Migrant Hub’ shifted structure and activities from the broad founding remit to one still in existence through 2019 in response to the changes in UK migration policy. Additionally, there was a major shift in the beneficiaries served by the organisation. Migrant communities were increasingly vulnerable to policy changes as the idea of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ migrants entered the broader discourse [Former Director].These new client groups, and increased vulnerability resulting from policy, coincided with the refocusing of the organisation’s mission to be more responsive to changes in migrants’ needs and demands. Organisational activities focused on migrant ‘issues’, helping address employment and, as the decade progressed, providing migrants both advice services and direct housing support, which built on the existing community development work and provided a safe and welcoming space for local groups. This required the organisation to build up local social capital and to develop symbolic capital in the larger field of migrant support to ensure support for these service users. The focus on social rights and solidarity was driven in large part by the organisation’s leadership, particularly the director and the board. ‘Migrant Hub’ created a Management Committee, made up of the constituent groups and trustees. This could be seen as a transition from a broad vision and mission that balanced multiple needs from different constituent member groups to a more ‘formalised’, coherent organisational vision focused on general migrant and asylum seekers issues.

Alongside this, the voluntary sector policy shifted with the government’s introduction of the ‘compact’ encouraged close partnership between local authorities and VSOs but left the details of the approach to the local authorities. This model of partnership provided lots of opportunities in the field for ‘Migrant Hub’ to meet with the local authority, build relationships and champion various migrant issues. With the increasing focus by New Labour on local level regeneration activities and local investment during this period, ‘Migrant Hub’ partnered with the local authority to access funding as part of a Neighbourhood Renewal Grant to support marginalised communities. Nationally the movement towards contracting out of asylum work to larger organisations opened new opportunities for ‘Migrant Hub’ such as the Work Programme[[2]](#endnote-2), demonstrating the introduction of a new power structure with voluntary sectors competing more openly.

The organisation continued to be driven by the same broad mission to be that welcoming space for migrants and the cultural capital brought by the founding groups. Rights and social justice issues continued to be a driving ethos for the organisation, but by shifting the governance structure, the organisation could be seen to ‘professionalise’ to seek out funding and provide more direct services to these new local communities. In response to the external environment, there were both proactive and reactive responses on the part of the organisation. The reactive responses constituted ‘recreation’ where comprehensive change was made but is still informed by the founding institutional paradigm. This meant shifts in the services provided and the beneficiaries in receipt of them but linked to the work of communities the organisation was embedded in and expanding on existing work. Whilst the proactive responses constitute ‘tuning’ with incremental changes in governance, informed by the history of the institution. The organisation leadership proactively positioned Migrant Hub to harness new potential funding sources both locally and nationally.

*2000s Period of diversification and adaptability*

Increased restrictions on entitlements for asylum seekers as well as rising cutbacks to legal aid and limited additional support made it increasingly complex for asylum seekers to navigate the UK system. Parallel to this there was the opening of European borders, with migrants encouraged to come to the UK to work. Migrants were caught in a cycle of services with ultimate responsibility falling onto VSOs. Numerous external agencies faced closure or limited capacity, placing the responsibility on a few organisations that could adapt, like ‘Migrant Hub’.

In line with the organisation’s social justice mission, ‘Migrant Hub’ responded to these migration trends by turning no one away. This shift in activities driven by the staff to meet changing needs of service users both in*“the issues that they were being faced with and the challenges they were engaging with were changing”* [Deputy Director]**.** This showed an expanding but consistent mission, reinforcing the perception that the organisation was an open accessible place for all. New staff were hired with similar cultural backgrounds to new service users, and staff requested training on welfare entitlements, increasing their expertise and cultural capital with this community. The workforce reflecting the diversity of the communities they supported brought significant advantages in understanding service user needs as well as increasing the cultural awareness and linguistic skills within the organisation, which contributed to building trust within the local community. The significant increase in demand led to advice services becoming the organisation main service. However, the organisation maintained the mission by ensuring these new activities retained organisational values regarding a non-judgemental, open-door policy.

In response to government policy to increase outsourcing of public services, ‘Migrant Hub’ adopted an entrepreneurial approach, driven by the director:

*[The Director] diversified our income streams and built up the trustees…because he recognised that sooner or later, he was going to retire. And a strong board of trustees supports the organisation. [Trustee member]*

Recruitment of new board members put priority on business-oriented expertise, skills, and networks to address issues within the wider external environment as opposed to representing local community groups.

The 2008 recession resulted in new austerity measures including a decline in Neighbourhood Renewal Funds which were no longer ring fenced for new community groups. This was detrimental both in reducing funding and impacting the positive working relationship Migrant Hub had with the local authority:

*I used to know a lot of people in [local authority], now there are no longer any boards, no more meetings to sit on, I ended up knowing one person in the local authority … [Former Director]*

A reduction in resources and capacity, including fewer partnership meetings and high staff turnover, made it challenging for the local authority to maintain the prior level of mutual support. This had a detrimental impact on the work of ‘Migrant Hub’ who had spent years strategically planning and building these networks. The leadership decided to strategically diversify ‘income sources and obtained a substantial Community Fund grant, specifically to support increasing advice services.

The leadership also looked outside the traditional funding sources of the organisation with contracts from a range of funders, such as the Home Office, Probation services, Working Links, and the Primary Care Trust. The Home Office contract was one of the first won by the organisation, this was one of several subcontracts from Refugee Action that shifted the sector. The funding was to provide refugee education and employment services (known as RIES), which due to the focus of the project was aligned with ‘Migrant Hubs’ mission. For the external stakeholders, there was positive recognition of their work in the area and a desire to be associated with a strong mission and values which added to their authenticity and legitimacy [Funder]. The organisation maintained strong organisational identity and cultural capital in the community whilst gaining the symbolic and economic capital from stakeholders that allowed them to compete more effectively for funding.

The 2000s then brought significant changes for the organisation’s funding stream driven by external and internal factors: the shift from grants to contracts; the entrepreneurial approach of the leadership team; and the impact of austerity measures. This seems to have been a mix of reactive and anticipatory adjustments by the leadership of the organisation initially adapting to changes in the environment with some incremental changes but under the influence of the chief executive the organisation engages in reorientation with comprehensive, anticipatory change in the structure of the board and the wider external partnerships. Whilst also navigating increased service demands which also required significant adaptation of services leading to significant reorientation with the expansion of advice services.

*2010s Period of hyperactivity and precarity*

The Immigration Act 2014[[3]](#endnote-3) introduced the concept of a ‘hostile environment’ for migrants, particularly the undocumented. In 2015, the ‘refugee crisis’ drew attention to the issue of asylum seekers and refugees.[[4]](#endnote-4) Against this larger migration controversy, ‘Migrant Hub’ remained committed to supporting those with the most complex cases, often the hardest to help due to the withdrawal of wider support. In 2017, 41% of the people who received advice and case work from the organisation had no recourse to public funds and many were undocumented. The organisation provided a non-judgemental and impartial service, maintaining its mission, treating all service users as equals:

*Our priority is not why they are here, ours is they are here so help them, not why. I have never asked a person why they have come to the UK… We don’t have a say in that matter if they can stay or not, we can help them to talk on their behalf or write a reference on their behalf but it does not go beyond that. [Adviser]*

The organisational ethos of compassion, empathy, and solidarity all contributed to maintaining and developing a strong staff commitment to the social purpose and therefore embedding this in the organisation. This was demonstrated by staff working long hours, some on a voluntary basis, and often ‘going the extra mile’ for service users, often beyond their duties and responsibility. Staff valued the work they were undertaking, filling a gap in welfare provision, and supporting the most vulnerable in society:

*I do think some of our advice team do take [service users] into their own homes and look after them, and they do the things that you think which they shouldn’t be doing. But they do it because they are dealing with real needs all the time* *[Trustee member]*

The moral conviction of the organisation’s workforce to support the humanitarian cause, viewing the work as actively disputing existing political agendas was essential in maintaining drive, commitment, and strong work ethic within the organisation.

With the increase in demand, coupled with the decrease in support by external agencies and funders, ‘Migrant Hub’ subsidised ‘unpopular services’ (e.g., those services for undocumented migrants the government perceived unfavourably) by generating their own income. They developed an enterprise stream which involved: an interpreting service; ideas of setting up an enterprise on personalisation[[5]](#endnote-5); and a housing project selling services to the local authorities. The organisation needed to work across sectors, forming innovative partnerships to effectively address the complex needs of users. The entrepreneurial approach pushed the organisation to take on risky initiatives, such as setting up a social enterprise as a subsidiary.

Throughout this period the organisation was driven by its social purpose and desire to diversify income. Extension of services showed continuity in the mission of the organisation with tuning of services by staff anticipating needs of new groups and incrementally changing the focus of their work. Whilst the leadership of the organisation once again anticipated the need for comprehensive funding changes reorienting funding streams with the creation of the social enterprise.

**Discussion**

Looking at the history of the organisation shows that the organisation existed in a state of continuous change, evolving to respond to and in anticipation of major policy events. By looking at both the structures, norms, and routines, it was possible to see the nuances of the change and the areas of stability. One area of stability was around the mission of the organisation to be a place of solidarity to migrant groups that was welcoming and trusted by them. This was consistent throughout the different periods of the organisation often employing staff from those very communities. In terms of change, there were three key areas of change: the service users, the services, and funding and governance. The changes in service users were often linked to resulting changes in services depending on the scale of the new demands. First, the recreation of organisational activities to provide support services to migrants, which are then reoriented to address increased demands for advice and then finally incrementally adjusted to meet specific needs of additional groups. Whilst the funding and governance changes are a mix of reactive and proactive approaches to ensure economic stability for the organisation over time. Initially only refining governance structures to create clear organisational structures in anticipation of funding changes, but over time leading to more comprehensive changes in governance also to address funding changes. The specific approaches to identifying funding sources were first incremental and then more comprehensive in direct reaction to the changing funding landscaping which led to more complex considerations of how those funding providers matched with the mission of the organisation.

By taking that historical approach, it is possible to identify three key factors that influenced internal organisational stability as well as its adaptive capability: engaged staff, clear vision and mission, and strong leadership. This is consistent with best practice around organisational change discussed in the literature. Firstly, staff showed a strong work ethic, commitment, and passion for the social purpose of the organisation. This reinforced that the regular practices of the organisation are essential to creating the right culture and allowing staff to engage in meaning-making (Ospina and Foldy, 2010; Knapp et al, 2019). The respondents believed that mainstream services had failed to support vulnerable service users, placing them in a marginalised position in the welfare system. Consequently, staff valued the work they were undertaking, filling a gap in welfare provision, and supporting the most vulnerable in society. Staff were intrinsically motivated and empowered to support changes in the direction of services to better support service users. Secondly, the combination of compassion, empathy, and solidarity all contributed to maintaining and developing a strong commitment throughout the organisation to its social purpose and broad mission. This was demonstrated by staff working long hours, some on a voluntary basis, away, and often ‘going the extra mile’ for service users, even taking on additional training to improve their skill base. This is consistent with other studies that discuss the importance of practices and activities that create spaces which build capital and connection with the community (Harris and Young, 2010; Jacklin-Jarvis and Cole, 2019). Thirdly, whilst the leadership at this time strived for innovative ways of working, this drew on the inherent strengths of the organisation’s everyday practices and actions. Without strong habitus underpinning everyday actions and practice (and giving staff confidence to challenge leadership) there was the potential for significant mission drift (Bennett, 2008). This more collective approach to leadership allowed staff buy-in and belonging allowing changes to stick (Knapp et al, 2019; Jacklin-Jarvis and Rees, 2022).

This shows the importance of the push and pull of both internal and external forces on the extent of organisational change within the organisation, which highlights the importance of undertaking micro-level institutional analysis (Taylor and Lansley, 2000; Ramnath, 2009). This also shows the importance of the agency of organisations in how it addressed changes. As noted above, the organisational leadership decided even with shifts in the migrant policy field it was essential to maintain core values and mission. This was done with awareness that focusing on improving economic capital could then impact organisational norms and value, such as undergoing a process of professionalisation by reshaping staffing practices and movements away from traditional partnership working. The agency to maintain the habitus and core mission despite external factors, shows the importance of organisational leadership and agency in determining the path of organisational change. The organisation also made choices about how capital was utilised during shifts in the fields and determined when capital should transition from one form to another. This could be seen in the move to diversify the board. Not only did this build on the organisation’s social and cultural capital but it is a key example of how capital can transition, in this case to symbolic capital. The symbolic capital drawn from the latest members of the board built the perception of ‘Migrant Hub’ as a highly skilled and professional organisation, strengthening their competitive position.

**Conclusion**

By this case historically, this article illustrates the inherent tensions for medium-sized VSOs in balancing mission continuity with adapting internal structures to external changes. By following the trajectory of the organisation demonstrates its agency: rather than passively reacting, the workforce's commitment to social purpose and mission serves as a central touchstone to guide the organisation through external and internal pressures. This challenges the idea that VSOs are passive victims to mission drift (Chapman et al., 2008).

Exploring an organisation over time provides a detailed trajectory of its continuity and change. Whilst based on a single case, this article highlights VSOs’ flexibility VSOs in responding to larger economic, political, and social forces whilst focusing on specific needs of migrants excluded from statutory provision. It also highlights the importance of a strong and committed organisational culture that can withstand challenges from diversification of funding and consequent professionalisation.

These two core lessons, the importance of flexibility and strong organisational culture, are significant given the continuing economic, political, and societal challenges VSOs face. Policies towards refugees and asylum seekers in the UK are shifting due to global conflicts (e.g. Ukrainian resettlement scheme). Additionally, global movements regarding social inequalities (e.g. race, gender), particularly within public services, are reshaping the political agenda in increasingly polarised ways worldwide. The need for trusted VSOs with strong social and cultural capital will likely only increase (Dayson et al. 2021). Therefore, learning from organisations like ‘Migrant Hub’, who have maintained their core work whilst adapting to new challenges, is crucial. Further research on this and similar cases is recommended to consider the intersecting perspectives of migration studies, social policy, and social justice that shape the context of VSOs in the UK and globally.

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1. Replaced by Refugee Integration and Employment Support (RIES) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The UK’s Work Programme (2012-18) was a major employment services programme, inspired by new public management principles. The central government funded a small number of prime providers who subcontracted service providers mainly using a payment by results model. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This included: To make it easier to deport migrants; Requirement on private landlords to check the immigration status of their tenants; A reduction in the number of rights to appeal an immigration decision (17 to 4); Enforcements made to cut down ‘health tourism’ migrants who apply to stay in the UK for more than six months, by requiring them to pay a ‘health surcharge’ to the NHS. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This saw a rise in asylum seekers entering the UK and the introduction of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Personalisation refers to anyone with a long-term illness and entitled to public health care controlling the services they use by having their own personal accessible pot of funding. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)