

Beyond symbolism: the roles of action planning and case-making in immigrant integration policymaking

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Abstract

How do city-level policymakers build support for substantive action in policy domains characterized by low levels of national salience and limited local capacity, and which evidentiary resources support as well as reflect these uses? Despite much attention to policymakers' engagement with evidence, existing work tends to focus on domains where the issues at stake attract high levels of input and influence from central governments. This limits empirical and theoretical understanding of how local efforts to implement potentially contentious policies arise, and through which means. In response, we examine how municipal actors in 12 cities and regions across the UK have devised and communicated policies on immigrant integration—an area that lacks national policy inputs yet is locally consequential—through the mechanism of “action planning.” Drawing on 6 years' worth of documentary evidence generated through a university-initiated collaboration with these municipalities, we show how action plans gather attention for objectives and propagate examples of practice to other cities—what we call “case-making.” This serves as a micro-foundation for the action planning mechanism, which links symbolic statements about immigrant integration with substantive intended actions.

Keywords: action plans; cities; case-making; immigration; integration; municipalities; policymaking

Understanding the forms, drivers, and consequences of evidence use has been a central concern to studies of public policy across domains including healthcare (Parkhurst et al., 2018), immigration (Boswell, 2009), and international development (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022). These studies not only observe how the uptake and deployment of evidence varies across substantive topics while also depends on factors related to the suppliers of evidence and those who demand it (Haselswerdt & Rigby, 2021). Yet while this body of work usefully demonstrates the often-contingent nature of evidence and its relationship to other actors in policymaking, it tends to focus on national-level dynamics in issue areas that attract large amounts of attention as well as resources. Moreover, it tends to ignore *how* these dynamics arise.

In response, we contribute to this literature in several ways. First, we develop understanding of how policy intentions are transformed into substantive activities through a mechanism of “action planning” underpinned by “case-making.” This fits alongside recent efforts to generate stronger theorization around evidence use (Cairney, 2021; Parkhurst, 2016). Second, we study a longer-standing example of

evidence use occurring at a relatively novel scale: that of “cities” or “municipal regions.” Urban areas have arguably always been central to understanding how states express power through policymaking (Brenner, 2004). Yet the combination of growing economic and social crises that are acutely-felt in cities alongside political and civil society-led movements have renewed attention to this level of governance (Vine, 2024). Moreover, it has spurred on use of cities as new lenses onto knowledge production itself (Brenner & Schmid, 2015). Third, we focus on a policy domain—immigrant integration—that is characterized by low national salience (in contrast to the high salience of discussions about centrally led migration governance), low levels of local capacity, and yet is highly consequential for cities that attract and bear responsibility for large numbers of migrants and other newcomers. These features heighten the significance of cities in policymaking processes, as seen in the proliferation of networks connecting municipalities on integration issues (Caponio, 2021).

Our evidence comes from a range of documents—action plans, briefings, agendas—generated as part of a university-led project spanning 6 years from 2017 to 2024 which connected 12 cities and municipalities in the UK to support integration and inclusion efforts within and across group participants (Broadhead, 2024). By thematically analyzing these documents, and locating the analysis within theories of evidence use that incorporate a multi-level perspective, we show how *action planning* helps frame policy problems for key constituencies. Then, by identifying how cities tend to use case studies to pilot specific interventions and demonstrate holistic changes to decision-making processes, we conceive these uses as *case-making* and argue it serves as a micro-foundation for the effectiveness of action planning in low-salience and limited capacity issue spaces like integration. Taken together, our study contributes empirically to the study of policy-making that occurs at municipal levels, and theoretically to understanding of how actors use evidence to generate and gather support for substantive rather than symbolic actions.

Theorizing Action Planning and Case-Making in Municipal Immigrant Integration Policy

Our overall theoretical argument is that municipal policymakers deploy *case making* within action plans to generate enthusiasm and build support for more substantive (as opposed to primarily symbolic) policy objectives in low-salience and limited capacity contexts as immigrant integration in the UK remains. This is because cases represent a particular form of evidence that contrasts with other evidentiary resources available to policymakers. We make this argument in two steps. First, we outline how policy on immigrant integration plays out in municipal settings. Second, we conceive action planning as a mechanism that connects symbolic and substantive policy outcomes, and develop “case-making” as a micro-foundation for this mechanism.

Municipal Policymaking on Immigrant Integration

A well-established body of scholarship has explored municipal policymaking on immigrant integration across contexts. These studies often focus on case study cities and are motivated by a recognition of cities’ growing importance in implementing migration policies on-the-ground (Lacroix & Spencer, 2022). One strand documents the types of policies that cities devise and implement. These range from actions that deliver mainly symbolic benefits to immigrant residents—such as using welcoming rhetoric and more inclusive legal references in published documents—to actions that substantively extend rights and services to immigrants (Bazurli & de Graauw, 2023). Another strand identifies which factors most strongly contribute to policy regimes. Here, it is clear that structural features, including the visibility and centrality of immigrants to the main levers of policymaking, political factors such as the partisanship of city governments, and the strength of national governments relative to cities are crucial (Emilsson, 2015; Graauw de & Vermeulen, 2016). Yet there is no clear consensus about whether these drivers are universal: rather, it is more likely that observed policy regimes arise from context-specific arrangements of these features (e.g., Meer et al., 2021 in the case of housing).

While this turn toward localism has enhanced understanding of cities in policymaking processes (Waite & Bristow, 2019), there remain open questions about *how* municipal policymakers achieve their goals, and what role—if any—different forms of evidence might play in these processes. At national levels, immigration is a domain where policymakers’ agendas tend to lead knowledge production in a legitimizing manner because of the high degree of politicization and lack of commonly recognized standards or goals (Boswell, 2009). Yet, whether this is likely to be true either on a relatively low-salience

issue like integration or at the level of cities is unclear. On one hand, in the absence of strong steers by central government, municipalities may feel emboldened as well as possess practical scope to diverge from national policies impacting immigrants (Bazurli & de Graauw, 2023). Moreover, municipal policy-makers may be more receptive towards interventions asking them to consider their local needs when evaluating research evidence (e.g., Bertram et al., 2018). On the other hand, given overlapping pressures and relatively few resources for the issue, city governments might use different strategies and practices to achieve their goals—particularly substantive ones that are likely to be more contentious to implement compared to symbolic ones. In this regard, prior work on local dimensions of policymaking offers less guidance as to what mechanisms might explain patterns of evidence use at the city level—an important prerequisite for making stronger explanatory claims—and which empirical clues might indicate the presence of these mechanisms

Action Planning and Case-Making: A Micro-foundational View on Evidence Use

Responding to this problem, we focus on the level of organizations (conceived here as comprising municipal offices, councils, and local authorities) to develop the link between their symbolic statements and their strategies as statements of priorities and intended substantive actions. To be clear, our analysis acknowledges how macro-level features of integration policy as well as individual-level decisions made by municipal actors also bear upon this link (Allen, 2017). Nevertheless, in what follows, we delimit our contribution as being about *case making* through action plans, while leaving open the possibility that additional mechanisms may serve similar linking functions.

Action plans and associated planning processes regularly appear across policy domains characterized by complexity, including public health (Hagger & Luszczynska, 2014), international development (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022), and environmental management (Koontz & Newig, 2014). Whether targeting individuals or organizations, action planning aims to bridge gaps between intentions and behaviors by establishing “deliberate, conscious processes of decision-making and self-evaluations, embedded in the formation of action” (Hagger & Luszczynska, 2014, 11). As such, they are best viewed as sets of practices as well as objects of policymakers’ attention.

On a technical level, these processes should help support more parsimonious and consistent outcomes while reducing the costs of relearning and re-establishing procedures for similar problems. Meanwhile, on a political level, plans send important signals about organizations’ priorities and values, whether through the language used within these documents (Bevir & Rhodes, 2022; Rek-Woźniak, 2023) or through practical efforts to set standardized templates and decisions to foreground certain types of evidence—usually quantitative in nature—over others (Beier & Çağlar, 2020). This fits within broader trends toward metricization in several fields including migration (Boswell et al., 2015).

Without contesting the value of this prior work, we take a different approach by focusing on how action planning occurs in a policy domain characterized by low national salience—and therefore few direct material or rhetorical inputs from central government—and limited capacity on the part of policymakers themselves. Specifically, we argue policymakers turn to other evidentiary resources and practices to convey their arguments to peers and build support for substantive action: what we call *case-making*. In our usage, “cases” refer to detailed and context-specific examples of practical activities undertaken by municipal policymakers, and which prominently appear in action planning processes in narrative forms to achieve persuasive ends. While previous work has usefully described and systematically reviewed different types of narratives constructed and communicated by policymakers (Epstein et al., 2014; Fadlallah et al., 2019), the processes by which narratives link intentions to actions remain underdeveloped in both theoretical and empirical terms—although see Cairney (2021) for a recent effort to do this for evidence-use more broadly.

Therefore, we argue case-making is a micro-foundation for how action plans derive their power as resources available to municipal policymakers as they try to implement substantive rather than solely symbolic policies. Crucially, as we demonstrate in the empirical materials, cases are a form of evidence that contrasts with established sources of quantitative data in the realm of immigration in the UK. Moreover, cases take on special relevance and usefulness in low-salience domains like immigrant integration in the UK.

Local Dimensions of Evidence Use for Addressing Immigrant Integration: The UK Context and Inclusive Cities Approach

Before moving to our empirical analysis, we demonstrate how immigrant integration, as it plays out at the municipal level in the UK, is a domain characterized by a lack of national salience and centralized planning. While these features may give local actors greater scope to develop and implement their objectives, it also places greater burdens on their capacity to do so—an observation that is particularly salient during crises that divert already-limited attention and resources elsewhere.

Integration Policymaking in the UK: Low Salience and Limited Capacity

Compared to other policy areas and other European countries, immigrant integration in the UK has been characterized as attracting “low salience and limited capacity” (Broadhead, 2020, 1). This differs from issues of migration governance—comprising decisions about how to “steer, manage, or coordinate” (Geddes et al., 2019, 9) migration directly as well as its effects—which have tended to be more salient in public debates and draw higher levels of centralized government capacity and resources to support action.

Of course, immigrants’ experiences and impacts in UK cities are related to broader governance questions that political actors may raise alongside growing public concern about immigration (YouGov, 2024). Rather, we observe how policymaking on integration is largely devolved *despite* national concern: there remains no UK-wide strategy on integration specifically. An independent review on opportunity and integration (the “Casey Review”) commissioned by the Conservative government in 2015 found that, up to that point, “cohesion or integration plans have not been implemented with enough force or consistency, they have been allowed to be diluted and muddled, they have not been sufficiently linked to socioeconomic inclusion, and communities have not been engaged adequately” (Casey, 2016, 16). A subsequent Green Paper by the then-Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government built on this through an “Integrated Communities Strategy,” which in turn informed a set of “Indicators of Integration” published by the Home Office (2019), though these have not yet been widely implemented. More generally, the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Integration—an informal collection of Members of Parliament across parties who gather to address areas of shared interests—had already characterized the UK’s integration policy landscape as a “tangled division of responsibility for integration policy between central government departments and agencies [which] has been compounded by the lack of an agreed view as to the role of local government in this policy area” (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration, 2017, 46).

By contrast, devolved administrations have taken greater action in the forms of strategies that are active (for Scotland), published (Wales), and in draft (Northern Ireland) forms. Instead, the UK approach has tended to be dominated by a focus on equalities—particularly along lines of race and ethnicity, as enshrined in the 2010 Equality Act—and through replicating the broad migration categories (i.e., asylum-seekers, refugees, economic migrants, international students) already used at the national level (Broadhead, 2020).

Yet given this lack of material and policy inputs flowing from the national level into local areas to support integration efforts, municipal governments still have large and growing roles to play in welcoming newcomers. Notably, local governments have acquired a host of new responsibilities not only involving refugees and migrants brought on by Syrian refugee resettlement efforts from 2015, but also includes partial responsibility for Afghan resettlement, supporting Hong Kong British Nationals Overseas, assisting with newly arrived Ukrainians, and providing help to European nationals in a post-Brexit environment.

However, central funding has generally not kept pace with these developments. Local councils have experienced a 27% cut in their real terms spending power since 2010 (Local Government Association, 2023). Meanwhile, the funding that has come through for providing these services has generally been piecemeal and scheme-specific, with very little dedicated towards integration activities except for the Hong Kong BN(O) visa which did provide specific funding for integration. Other funds for integration have generally been provided through bids to schemes run by central government (e.g., the “Controlling Migration Fund” run by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) or the European Union’s “Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund” to which the UK no longer contributes.

Table 1. 2018 Foreign-born population by local authority, in percentage and gross terms.

Local authority	Percentage foreign-born (2018)	Estimated number of foreign-born (2018)
Birmingham	26	290,000
Peterborough	24	48,000
Coventry	22	81,000
Brighton and Hove	19	53,000
Glasgow	16	96,000
Bristol	16	73,000
Cardiff	13	48,000
Sheffield	13	77,000
Liverpool	11	56,000
Newport	9	13,000

Note: Comparable local authority-level data not published for Northern Ireland or the Greater London area. Source: Office for National Statistics.

Local Integration Contexts: An Overview of Participating Cities and the “Inclusive Cities” Response

Our materials come from documents generated through 6 years’ worth of engagement with 12 UK cities and municipalities through a university-facilitated programme called “Inclusive Cities” that took place over two phases from 2017–19 to 2019–24. Although we describe the materials themselves in the next section, here we provide the local demographic and integration contexts confronting these cities, as well as the program itself which linked policymakers in these municipalities.

Six cities participated in phase one: London (through the Greater London Authority which serves as the devolved regional government), Glasgow, Bristol, Liverpool, Peterborough, and Cardiff. Then, seven additional cities joined in phase two while Peterborough dropped out: Brighton and Hove; Birmingham; Belfast; Coventry; Newport; Newry, Mourne and Down; and Sheffield. These participating cities were selected from a longer list of UK cities displaying high levels of migration based on the most recently available data from the census and other public sources at the time. [Table 1](#) illustrates how, while both the share and gross number of foreign-born population varies at the local authority level across these cases (noting that comparable data for London, Belfast, and Newry, Mourne and Down are not available), migrants still comprise considerable groups in the cities. Moreover, cities generally remain by the far the most popular destinations for migrants in the UK: London continues to dominate as the most-attractive destination, while nearly all other rising destinations are in the south-east of the country ([Swinney, 2022](#)).

The cities themselves also vary in terms of overall populations, which matters for the size and scale of the local authority.¹ Seven participating cities are among the 12 largest in the UK, while the others appear in common taxonomies of 24 cities with populations greater than 175,000 ([House of Commons Library, 2018](#)). This has implications for local governments’ capacities as well as abilities to receive, use, and synthesize evidence to achieve their objectives. For example, bodies in larger cities such as the Greater London Authority and Birmingham City Council have dedicated data observatories and repositories on which they can draw, while others have well-developed and highly professionalized policy groups focusing on migration (such as Coventry’s “Refugee and Migrant Service” or London’s Migration Team). By contrast, smaller local authorities typically merge these activities with other broader departments—or do not run them at all. Indeed, since local authorities lack statutory duties to provide integration services as described earlier, integration tends to sit in different organizational spaces in different departments: among Inclusive Cities participants, these included economic development, libraries and culture, community safety, and housing ([Broadhead, 2020](#)). This is even more apparent in Northern Ireland where the powers and responsibilities devolved to local authorities vary widely from those elsewhere in the UK. Taken together, these observations illustrate how integration holds an unstable and tenuous place within the UK policymaking landscape, especially when looking across those municipalities that host and are directly impacted by large shares of new arrivals.

¹ To be clear, classification as a city in the UK is not directly related to size, but can arise from other historical or ceremonial reasons ([House of Commons Library, 2022](#)).

In response, the “Inclusive Cities” program aims to improve the integration of newcomers in UK cities. Building on prior efforts to conceive integration as a multidimensional and multidirectional process rather than a unidirectional one (Spencer & Charsley, 2016), it links participating cities to foster two-way knowledge exchange *between* member cities, *within* cities (as in among departments and local stakeholders as relevant to each particular setting), in ways that synthesize and generate new data *with* the facilitating university partner, and *beyond* the UK through participation in the Welcoming International network.² These levels intentionally reflect a co-productive model where policymakers and researchers shape each others agendas and understandings (Boswell & Smith, 2017).

Several forms of evidence and evidence use appear across these levels. On the one hand, a range of knowledge generated by and residing within academics, policymakers, and practitioners flows among members of program: summary reports, scholarly studies, and briefings. On the other hand, these forms of knowledge also sustain processes of learning and advising. This highlights a broader use of evidence which we argue is especially relevant for low-salience policy environments that do not attract strong inputs from central government: generating support and enthusiasm for local action—what we term *case-making*.³

Materials and Methods

Our materials are documentary in nature, spanning 6 years from 2017 to 2023 during which the Inclusive Cities project had worked with the 12 cities and regions. They comprise an initial literature review of available evidence sources; actions plans submitted by nine participating cities; 11 briefings written by the university partner relating to integration issues during the COVID-19 pandemic and UK response to it; agendas from 12 meetings that convened municipal policymaker representatives between October 2017 and June 2023; and five gray literature briefings which informed discussions throughout the project. Collectively, these documents provide examples of action plans as well as the wider municipal policy context surrounding immigrant integration. Moreover, one of the authors (Broadhead) was directly involved in this data-generating process as an “embedded researcher” (Ward et al., 2021) associated with the university partner which facilitated the Inclusive Cities program.

We apply two sets of methods to analyze these documents. First, to identify high-level patterns of language in the action plans and COVID-19 briefings which comprise the bulk of the materials, we use corpus linguistic techniques that measure how clusters of words tend to appear together, as well as their frequencies (McEnery & Hardie, 2011). We completed this work using the Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014) which is a web-based tool for storing and examining sets of texts (“corpora”). Second, informed by our research interests as well as the patterns identified by the corpus linguistic analysis, we used qualitative thematic analysis to identify how cases—both as forms of evidence and as vehicles for arguments—appeared in these documents. We have contextualized our analysis of these materials with reference to the direct engagement of the embedded researcher who was involved in the action planning stages.

Combining these methods is an increasingly common practice when studying organizations’ external outputs and internal workings, notably because it enables researchers to place specific instances of language that may be significant in their wider contexts (Allen & Easton-Calabria, 2022). Even so, we acknowledge our primary materials are limited in terms of which aspects of policymaking processes they can reveal. As relatively high-level documents, they are mainly statements of intention, although more detailed than mission or vision statements. Relatedly, while the presence of the embedded researcher raises our confidence in claiming how evidence was perceived and used during the action planning process, we cannot say for certain whether case-making had its intended impact because we lack observations of how cases developed before and after their appearances in these documents. Finally, we are only concerned with municipal-level action planning, unlike other examples which focus on national or international scales. Nevertheless, as we explore in the discussion section, the insights from our study potentially travel to other policy domains and settings where local governments have a greater role and stake in achieving policy outcomes.

² “Welcoming International” is a coalition of initiatives advancing inclusion and belonging in localities worldwide, founded by Welcoming America. Inclusive Cities is a founding partner.

³ All the participating cities share what might be called an “enthusiasm bias” as there was no direct incentive to participate. Therefore, the fact that these municipalities chose to participate signals their pre-existing interest.

Results

Action Plans: Framing Policy Problems to Generate Change

The first aspect of evidence use on which we focus involves the choice of action planning as a central feature of the program. Feedback from city representatives in preceding projects indicated how they valued, and were interested in an action planning approach, which the Inclusive Cities program developed further. The university partner initially provided a generic action plan template, and then developed it through several iterations in consultation with municipal participants. It comprised seven dimensions that cities applied to their priority areas or goals. [Box 1](#) displays the generic template headings, the precise wording of which some cities slightly changed.⁴ Although participants were free to either deviate from this template or use another approach altogether, most noted how action planning provided a structured process which allowed cities to “keep up the pace” and allowed the “wider council to see that we are making progress and have objectives,” while also providing a familiar tool which enabled easier adoption ([Broadhead & Allen, 2022](#)). Moreover, while the action plan template was a directive tool that aimed to guide policymakers, we emphasize that the headings and overall approach arose from co-productive consultation with policymakers themselves.

Box 1. Generic headings used in the action planning documentation

Generic headings used in action plans

Actions to achieve this priority
Progress to date
How this supports the strategic priorities of the city
Lead responsible for delivery
Resources needed to accomplish priority and action
Timescale
Success criteria (indicator of success)

This highlights two functions of action planning which align with their purpose of bridging gaps between intention and behaviors: they provide a means of demonstrating forward-looking momentum on a policy issue, and they serve as a visible record of both prospective and retrospective action. Unlike strategic plans which aim to set out the rationale, evidence and values for a particular course of action, these action plans are designed to identify and motivate specific steps to take. This is best illustrated by the ways that the document templates ask how the proposed plan “supports the strategic priorities of the city” (38 mentions across 7 documents), identify “success criteria” (17 mentions across 6 documents), and measure “progress to date” (12 mentions across 7 documents). These are clearly efforts to translate broad aspirations into concrete activities. Moreover, the audiences for these plans are named partners within municipal governments who are held accountable for the activities in the plans. Templates identify the “lead responsible for delivery” (15 mentions across 6 documents), comprising a variety of actors including councils, civil society organizations such as local charitable bodies, or other committees.

On the one hand, these aspects demonstrate how action plans can become central to meso-level operations within municipal policymaking. By connecting relevant stakeholders and committing them to benchmarks for success, these plans serve as common and comprehensive repositories that convey the intentions of policymakers. As such, action plans serve as both the vehicles for establishing cultures of evidence use within these municipal settings and the mechanisms by which these cultures are embedded as well as practically enacted. However, the depth and scope of these plans are not identical: [Table 2](#) displays the number of actions contained within each plan. It reveals how the plan with the most actions (Newport) had over four times as many actions as the one with the fewest (Coventry).

On the other hand, these plans’ role also relates to macro-level observations about how immigrant integration is a relatively low-salience issue—particularly in the UK where there is no national approach and cities instead have taken the lead on policy development. Notably, by establishing clear lines of

⁴ The published action plans are available at: <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/project/inclusive-cities>.

Table 2. Number of unique priorities and actions by municipality action plan.

Municipality	Total number of actions
Newport	27
Belfast	19
Birmingham	18
Newry, Mourne and Down	18
Sheffield	17
Bristol	10
Brighton and Hove	9
Glasgow	8
Coventry	6

Table 3. Stated reasons for action planning on immigrant integration and frequency in plans.

Stated reason for participation	Number of plans (municipalities)
Need to link with strategic activities that are happening elsewhere in the municipality	7 (Belfast; Birmingham; Coventry; Glasgow; Newport; Newry, Mourne and Down; Sheffield)
History of migration	5 (Birmingham; Bristol; Coventry; Glasgow; Newport)
City identity	4 (Birmingham; Bristol; Coventry; Glasgow)
Recent local increase in migration	3 (Belfast; Coventry; Newry, Mourne and Down)
Broader political developments happening elsewhere in the municipality	3 (Belfast; Birmingham; Sheffield)

responsibility and collating a range of actions, the plans attempt to amplify the importance of integration for the municipal regions. Consequently, the plans serve an agenda-setting function as they attempt to frame policy problems and opportunities as requiring action (Cairney, 2021). Yet they do so by ascribing to features that do not necessarily require the use of traditional forms of evidence such as quantitative data to motivate the subsequent actions contained within the plan. This is most clearly seen in the preambles to each action plan in which each municipality sets out its rationale for taking action on immigrant integration in the first place. Table 3 displays the main reasons and their frequencies, deriving from the qualitative thematic coding.

The most frequently stated reason (in seven of nine submitted plans) involves recognition that the issue of integration is connected to other strategies and efforts already occurring in other parts of the municipal government. However, it is also apparent that policymakers motivate their actions by referring to qualitative features of their cities—historical patterns of welcoming migrants, and therefore an established track record of doing integration work, as well as a sense of local identity that foregrounds inclusionary attitudes and behaviors as essential components of what it means to be from that city. For example, the Glasgow plan asserts that “migration is in the DNA of Glasgow and international migration has added a rich dimension to the city’s profile.” Meanwhile, Coventry links its war-time history to its present-day objectives on integration, explaining how “Coventry was devastated by war and renewed to become a city of peace, reconciliation, and sanctuary, later welcoming migrants fleeing war and persecution, providing a place of safety to rebuild their lives.” Newport also invokes its historical importance as a trading city in its plan’s introductory motivation statement:

For centuries, residents from diverse communities have settled in Newport, enriching the city’s culture and contributing to develop a thriving and inclusive community: Newport Docks, health services and the steel industry have long attracted scientists, skilled workers and labourers from all over the world.

The presence and use of these plans, therefore, links intentions with actions while being motivated by city-specific narratives—an observation we return to in the third section.

Data Guides: Lack of Specific Quantitative Evidence in Action Plans

Next, we turn attention to the kinds of knowledge used in the plans as they served this linking function. Initially, the university partner developed an online resource guide that provided accessible and

visualized data on local migration trends which it made available to all local authorities, including the participating cities.⁵ Specific to the Inclusive Cities program, this information was also conveyed through the five background briefings. While the researchers involved in providing this service and analysis bore the associated costs, this set of activities was intended to serve as a key input for cities' action planning that would stimulate subsequent co-productive knowledge exchange dynamics. To what extent did this happen?

At least on paper, and corroborated by observations of discussions by the embedded researcher, the available data on relevant integration issues did not prominently feature within these documents. By data, we refer to measures about the stocks, impacts, or activities of newcomers to the municipal regions. Tellingly, the term "evidence" only explicitly appears once across the action plans—in a general and passing mention of Birmingham City Council's ambition to "ensure solutions are based on the widest available evidence." Meanwhile, "data" appears 12 times in 4 plans, with only two cities (Brighton and Hove, and Newport) referring to the Census or nationality datasets made available to the participating cities through the local data guide. The rest of the instances refer to objectives relating to cities' ambition of collecting data in the future on other local issues, such as the barriers migrants face in accessing services or employment opportunities.

What might have accounted for this lack of use? First, most directly, local governments generally did not have the capacity to seek out and process such data for the purposes outlined in the action plans in a policy area such as integration, which often already lacks its own datasets and readily available evidence. This is clearly apparent in the plans themselves: "staff time" was mentioned 24 times across 4 plans as being one of the key resources needed to implement actions. Second, where there had been resources and staff-members dedicated to doing policy-relevant analysis, these were moved to operational roles during the pandemic. This shift was reflected by the publication of 11 dedicated COVID-19 policy briefs that targeted specific issues related to cities' responses to the pandemic: these arose directly from municipal staff signaling they could no longer work on action planning during the emergency. This later extended to subsequent mobilizations such as supporting the Homes for Ukraine program and Afghan resettlement. In discretionary policy, spaces such as integration, spare policy, and analysis capacity are likely to be moved during crisis moments. Third, in practice, the participating policymakers relied on the university partner that had organized these action planning steps to synthesize and process the available data at an earlier stage of the process.

Case Studies: Gathering Support for Substantive Action Through "Case Making"

If conventional data did not feature in the plans, were other forms of evidence used in their place? Across the materials, case studies—specific examples of practice drawn from the municipal governments' activities—were major ways by which policymakers conveyed and captured progress on their proposals. These came in three forms: written summaries in six action plans; the 11 COVID-19 briefings which covered specific integration issues during the pandemic response; and presentations in meetings convened by the university partner where municipal representatives chose topics for discussion. We argue case studies fulfil a specific function within knowledge exchange: they capture and express examples of best practice to support the dissemination and diffusion of this practice among cities and, increasingly, within international city networks. More broadly, case studies serve as means of presenting complex processes and their outcomes—which can lead to their use in evaluation, presumably as an alternative to formal evaluation interventions that can require prohibitively high levels of staff time and resources.

Analyzing the cases in the action plans reveals two distinct modes of use: *piloting* that demonstrates the potential for an intervention to be scaled-up, and *introducing new lenses or approaches* to integration. First, several cases focus on specific projects that are relatively small and time-bound. In the action plans, these appear at the end of the documents in a separate box. Belfast, for example, reported on a 4-week festival during the 2022 African Cup of Nations football tournament that featured cross-cultural exchanges through food, music, and creative arts events. Meanwhile, Glasgow shared the experience

⁵ Available at <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/projects/local-data-guide/>. This guide comprises an interactive website with visualizations of local-level data designed by and in consultation with an internationally-recognized data visualizer, accompanied by guidance written by university researchers with expertise in both migration and the UK data sources on which the guide draws. The guide covers 10 key aspects of migration as it occurs at local levels, including: stocks, flows, data specific to key groups including asylum-seekers, refugees, children, and students, employment rates, and the use of English in the home.

of a 6-week consultation with local residents about how they would prefer naming a proposed public pedestrian bridge—a task that the city recognized would require more thoughtful approaches given its location in an area where “32 languages are spoken in the local primary [school]” and that has “historically been an area of settlement for asylum seekers and refugees.” Newport also shared their experience of organizing two days of holiday-themed events celebrating the figure of St Nicolas for its Czech, Slovak, Polish, and Hungarian communities. Piloting has a long history within policymaking: its value comes from an assumption that it is a technical and efficient way of testing policy interventions away from the messy reality of politics (Checkland et al., 2023). Yet pilots also frame and project the future (Nair & Howlett, 2016) by shaping what counts as a successful intervention in the first place—and therefore impacting whether some ideas are taken up by an organization.

The second mode of case study involves introducing a new lens or approach to integration policy-making among municipal representatives. Instead of focusing on a particular intervention, this type of case study highlights how the city has implemented a different process or way of working as it welcomes newcomers. One example came from Birmingham's action plan, in one of the longest case studies (542 words) among all submitted as part of the program. Birmingham outlined how its hosting of the 2022 Commonwealth Games would “progres[s] a range of activities through five work streams,” including one that would aim to “to create an environment for migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and British women together in Birmingham to develop English language skills and confidence by creating spaces, opportunities and connections for dialogue and interaction.” Another example (496 words) appeared in Brighton and Hove's action plan, which reported how it had developed a “Multicultural Employability Support Hub” over several iterations since 2019 that targeted marginalized populations including but not limited to migrants. Besides receiving assistance with employment-specific tasks such as creating a CV and completing application forms, participants also connect with other parts of the city administration such as those offering support for mental health conditions.

On the one hand, this form of case study clearly differs from a piloting function in its depth and detail. On the other hand, its intention is similar: to provide compelling evidence in support of an argument relating to policy objectives. In these instances, however, the objective is broader than simply developing buy-in for a particular intervention. Rather, it is to shift policy understanding of integration as a low-salience niche issue towards one that is more connected to mainstream municipal concerns and priorities such as supporting *all* residents' economic development (as in Brighton and Hove) or interpersonal relationships (as in Birmingham).

Alongside these functions, cities' engagement throughout the project illustrates how case studies serve as a way of diffusing and transferring policy ideas horizontally among city policymakers. These ideas can relate to content—such as directly lifting a pilot initiative to trial in another context—or to the style or structure of an approach, such as via multicultural or iterative consultations. Moreover, this process can happen through large-scale transformation and blanket adoption, or in subtle modifications of existing practice through incremental absorption. What makes this more likely to happen? Research into peer learning provides some clues that point to the power of cases—and, as we will discuss later, the role of case-making as a mechanism by which municipal policymakers' intentions turn into action. Cities are more likely to be receptive towards, and take up policy ideas when they encounter working examples in specific policy areas of interest (Carpenter et al., 2020). Moreover, personal networks and site visits also make policy transfer among municipal policymakers more likely (Einstein et al., 2019). These findings strongly align with our analysis of case studies as a means of supporting mutual learning and subsequent action: in the context of action planning. Case studies foster network building and build connections among cities by developing shared senses of what constitutes “best practice” in specific policy areas.

Discussion

Despite scholarly attention towards defining types of evidence and tracing their supply and demand in different national domains, less work has developed how these patterns arise, especially in settings that lack clear inputs from central government. Our focus on local-level manifestations of evidence generation and usage, as well as the way in which these activities occur, provides an important corrective. Using the policy domain of immigrant integration in the UK—an area characterized by low national salience and limited capacity among city-level policymakers—we developed the idea of *case-making* as

a micro-foundation of an *action-planning* mechanism that connects municipal policymakers' intentions with substantive action.

Analyzing documentation associated with 12 municipalities' participation in a university-led knowledge exchange program over 6 years revealed two key features of case-making: first, the centrality of cases that either report on pilot activities or introduce new procedures or approaches; and second, the embedding of these cases within broader sets of motivations for action which, in the case of integration, typically invoke qualitative and locally relevant reasons that connect with existing municipal aims instead of large-scale quantitative evidence. Moreover, case-making enhances the power of action planning by establishing and sustaining interest on what would otherwise likely remain a low-salience issue, as well as setting a visible record of activities that policymakers can use to frame retrospective and prospective arguments. This has a further consequence of fostering the transfer of ideas and interventions among municipalities that have an appetite for action yet limited capacity to systematically evaluate those actions' impacts.

Theoretically, our study adds to the limited understanding about local dimensions of evidence use. Our analysis shows how case-making serves as a micro-foundational means by which policymakers establish, sustain, and gather support for substantive policy change within an issue space that is relatively low-salience. Moreover, we highlight how action plans themselves can serve as carriers of different types of evidentiary resources that bear specific political relevance to the places from which they emerge. Attending to these local dimensions of evidence use in relation to more dominant national perspectives would be a valuable avenue for future comparative research (e.g., [Rek-Woźniak, 2023](#)).

There are two reasonable objections to our emphasis on and characterization of action planning and case-making. The first is that the genre of action plans—being further along the policy implementation pipeline than strategies or vision statements—may not explicitly include conventional data and evidence because these resources are assumed to have already been consulted. While this may be correct, we lean more heavily on the observation that municipalities' plans still tended to motivate their cases with reference to locally relevant features as well as linked their integration activities and intentions to pre-existing priorities ([Table 3](#)), even in a situation where the university partner specifically provided knowledge resources in an accessible manner that did not yet exist for local authorities.

Second, action plans tend to be static tools for policy planning even if their creators have ambitions of casting them as dynamic “living documents,” which may make their actual impacts blunt and circumscribed. Moreover, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which such plans capture real change and learning, or whether they merely codify policies that would have likely happened anyway ([Millard-Ball, 2013](#)). Acknowledging these possibilities, we nevertheless think two features of our study and design reduce the impact of these concerns. On the one hand, we focus on the link between intention and proposed action, which leaves open the possibility that the strength of this link may change over time. Indeed, our longitudinal design that followed these municipalities' engagement during the COVID-19 crisis demonstrates how this occurred through reprioritization of staff and resources. On the other hand, given that immigrant integration is a policy domain with few well-specified objectives originating from central government, municipalities did not actually inherit many established indicators on which they were explicitly required to make progress. Still, on both fronts, future research could productively use methods such as process tracing in other policy domains that use action planning to establish scope conditions around its effectiveness.

In summary, we argue that action planning remains significant in policy areas considered to be peripheral to national priorities. Through the mechanism of case-making, action plans generate buy-in from relevant coalitions while also reaching external audiences in the forms of peer cities by diffusing appealing examples of best practice. Consequently, our study provides avenues for understanding planning dynamics in other low-salience policy areas with few dedicated resources or knowledge inputs—notably, as a way of generating wider institutional momentum towards substantive action.

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Conflict of interest

None declared.

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