Full Length Article

Governing through partnership: Strategic migration partnerships and the politics of enrolment and ambivalence

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A B S T R A C T

This paper examines the role of partnerships in the governance of UK migration policy, considering how partnerships have been mobilised to navigate tensions between multiple state and non-state actors. The paper focuses on the work of regional strategic migration partnerships (SMPs) across the UK, bodies that bring together national and local government, statutory agencies, third sector organisations, and private contractors, all concerned with the management of migration and asylum. Considering SMPs as sites of collaboration and contention within local 'battlegrounds' of policy, the paper examines how enrolment and socialisation shape relations between actors, serving to sustain governmental authority but also offer openings for the formation of advocacy coalitions. Through examining how SMPs addressed the outsourcing of asylum support services, I argue that for many non-state actors enrolment into an SMP produces an ambivalent politics centred on forms of tactical closeness and critical discomfort. In concluding, I suggest the forms of intimacy created through enrolment serve to extend ambivalence as actors become torn between relationships and commitments, highlighting the fraught and often unstable nature of SMPs as bodies of policy coordination and advocacy potential.

In the UK, the governance of asylum and migration is often understood as a highly centralised affair, with the Home Office possessing considerable authority over both the development and the implementation of policy. Yet, as a range of critical discussions have highlighted, this centralised image conceals both the peopled nature of state practice (Cooper, 2019; Gill, 2016; Painter, 2006), and the multiple authorities, actors, and organisations that have a stake in enacting and reworking policy 'on the ground' (Darling, 2021, 2022a). Critically examining these governance relations and their peopled and intimate nature, is significant not only in advancing understanding of how authority is constituted and expressed, but also in identifying how diverse actors within migration governance seek to shape political futures through 'quiet' registers of power and influence (Allen, 2020). This paper explores the role of one mediating influence, the strategic migration partnership, to consider how the governing of asylum is constituted through varying forms of collaboration, contestation, and enrolment.

Established in the early 2000s, strategic migration partnerships (SMPs), were originally intended to help coordinate the dispersal of asylum seekers across the UK. Since 2007 the role of SMPs has expanded to address a wider range of migration issues such as human trafficking, the exploitation of migrant workers, and refugee resettlement schemes

(see Haycox, 2023 on the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme). Today there are 12 SMPs across the UK, each with a regional focus of activity.[1] Positioned at the intersections of national government, local government, statutory agencies such as police, health, and education services, third sector organisations, and private contractors, SMPs represent critical spaces in the landscape of UK migration policy. By bringing together a range of actors, SMPs occupy a precarious position between categories of control and contention, seeking to both provide a channel of communication for the Home Office and at the same time offer a forum for groups concerned with migrants' rights, welfare, and social solidarity. Despite this role in the governance structures of asylum and migration, SMPs remain significantly overlooked in migration research aside from a fleeting reference to the establishment of SMPs in a policy report on integration (Ali & Gidley, 2014). This paper responds to this omission through a critical discussion of the development, role, and significance of SMPs.

In situating SMPs in discussions over the role of partnerships within migration governance, the paper advances debate in two principal ways. First, it examines how SMPs offer a vital account of how the contemporary state is 'assembled' through multiple actors, relations, and convergences of interests (Cooper, 2019). The paper foregrounds the relations of power and enrolment that exist within SMPs, thus advancing

calls for greater attention to the 'horizontal' interactions of actors within studies of governance that explore the 'local' level of asylum and migration (Ambrosini, 2021; Spencer, 2018). In situating SMPs within a wider trend of partnership working and the convergence of state actors with other public and private organisations, the paper progresses understandings of the shifting relationships between state and non-state actors in migration. Such understanding is critically important at a time when non-state actors have taken on roles and responsibilities previously assigned to the state and exercise influence over the development and implementation of policy (Axelsson & Pettersson, 2021), raising questions over the uneven geographies of influence that pattern increasingly outsourced states (Allen, 2020; Darling, 2022a). At the same time, the paper complicates accounts of co-option that emerge in work on the 'shadow state' (DeVerteuil, Power, & Trudeau, 2020). Foregrounding patterns of enrolment that draw diverse state and non-state actors into partnership, the paper advocates for greater focus on the ambivalent politics of partnership that emerge, situating SMPs as sites of tactical closeness and 'implicit activism' for asylum advocates (Gill, Conlon, Tyler, & Oeppen, 2014; Horton & Kraftl, 2009) as much as they are 'soft spaces' of governmental control (Haughton, Allmendinger, & Oosterlynck, 2013).

By foregrounding the ambivalent politics of partnership, the paper goes beyond a concern for the governance role of SMPs. In highlighting the frustrations evident in maintaining SMPs, the paper illustrates how personal connections, reputational capital, and professional expertise become important to the often incomplete translation of policy into practice. Just as the 'organisational worth' of governance partnerships is evident in how they produce 'pathways of meeting, seeing, hearing, and instructing [that] contribute to forging state bodies and giving them a particular shape' (Cooper, 2019, p. 140), so personal relationships and connections form part of this organisational process. In looking to the changing roles of individuals within SMPs, the paper foregrounds how the 'assembled state' is a personal state. Whilst the shifting of positions between state and non-state actors has been a common area of concern within discussions of neoliberalism and the corporate capture of state activities (Crouch, 2016), focus has tended to galvanise around a 'revolving door' of high-status positions in the public and private sector as officials move between organisations and carry knowledge and institutional culture with them (Dardot & Laval, 2014). Focusing on roles within SMPs advances an understanding of the significance of personal biographies and relationships to how governance is enacted, and foregrounds the importance of intimate trajectories of friendship, affiliation, and fraught loyalties in governance. Exploring the ambivalent politics of SMPs situates them within discussions on the political importance, and governmental potential, of intimacy (Oswin & Olund, 2010; Pain & Staeheli, 2014).

The paper develops as follows. Section I examines discussions of partnerships and their role in UK social policy, before considering how recent work on migration has drawn upon the partnership as a model for navigating tensions between state and non-state actors. After outlining the empirical basis for this engagement with SMPs, the paper discusses the development of SMPs across the UK, exploring their emergence and the different roles they have developed. Considering SMPs as sites of collaboration and contention within local 'battlegrounds' of policy (Ambrosini, 2021), the paper then examines how enrolment and socialisation shape relations between actors, serving to sustain governmental authority but also offer openings for the formation of advocacy coalitions. Through examining how SMPs addressed the outsourcing of asylum support services, I argue that for many non-state actors enrolment into an SMP produces an ambivalent politics centred on forms of tactical closeness and critical discomfort. In concluding, I suggest the forms of intimacy created through enrolment serves to extend ambivalence as actors become torn between relationships and commitments, highlighting the fraught and often unstable nature of SMPs as bodies of policy coordination and advocacy potential.

1. Governance, partnership, and the 'battlegrounds' of asylum

Since the late 1990s, partnerships of varying forms have become a means of governing a range of public policy areas, including urban development, education, crime, and labour market integration. Reflecting bodies 'through which governmental, private, voluntary and community sector actors engage in the process of debating, deliberating and delivering public policy at the regional and local level' (Johnston, 2015, p. 16), partnerships were argued to represent 'new governmental spaces and subjects' (Larner & Craig, 2005, p. 421). This is not least because partnerships in public policy act to mould and shape relevant partners, producing collective understandings of common issues and establishing agendas (Barnes & Prior, 2009; McGuirk, 2000). Yet, as Spencer (2022) contends, hierarchies of power and inequality run through such processes of socialisation which often means, as Dahlstedt (2009:25) argues, that partnerships offer opportunities 'for participation, but not necessarily for influence'. In this context, it is tempting to view SMPs as little more than talking shops designed to give a veneer of accountability to the privatisation of asylum support (Darling, 2016). Yet, examining the practice of SMPs points to a more contested reality. Models of state capture and the co-option of third sector interests overlook the subtle, yet important, ways in which the formation of strategic alliances make SMPs more than sounding boards for exclusionary priorities. As Barnes and Prior (2009:10) note in relation to public service partnerships, these 'spaces of dialogue and deliberation' can become 'sites for the generation and realisation of 'subversive' action''.

SMPs can be understood as part of a 'partnership turn' which has been used to describe the growing use of international partnerships to 'manage' migration. Associated with EU enlargement the partnership approach represented 'a move towards more cooperative forms of migration governance' (Kunz, 2013, p. 1228), centred on enlisting multiple governments, agents, and even migrants, into the governing of migration (Kunz & Maisenbacher, 2013; Parkes, 2009). In doing so, the development of partnerships 'governs through the production and consent of responsible partners' (Kunz, 2013, p. 1228), inculcating a range of actors at multiple scales and producing normative expectations of what a good 'partner' will do to manage migration effectively. Recent discussions of the enrolment of humanitarian organisations into the practice of migration control also resonate with this turn to partnerships (Gerard & Weber, 2019; Kalir & Wissink, 2016; Kox & Staring, 2022). Here, humanitarian organisations have been argued to occupy conflicted positions, both 'advocating the interests of migrants' whilst also serving the interests of state governments 'by acting as a loyal partner within the immigration system' (Kox & Staring, 2022, p. 976). Such partnerships are most contentious when they engage humanitarian organisations in the work of 'voluntary return' practices, forging what Kalir and Wissink (2016:35) term a 'deportation continuum' in which the scope for political action is limited and where 'shared notions are produced' by the 'many interactions and collaborations between civil-society actors and state agents'.

Running parallel to these national framings of partnerships are discussions of transnational municipal networks and the possibilities these present for inclusive migration policy (Caponio, 2018; Spencer, 2022), not least through mobilising mechanisms of autonomy, strategic ambiguity, and discretion to subvert national policies (Darling, 2022b; Kos, Maussen, & Doomernik, 2016; Oomen, Baumgärtel, Miellet, Durmus, & Sabchev, 2021; Spencer, 2018). Here, Spencer (2022) argues that whilst work has begun to examine the impacts and reach of migration partnerships, relatively little is known about the internal dynamics and relationships of such bodies.

At the same time, SMPs can be situated in relation to work on the 'local' dynamics of asylum and migration (Ahouga, 2018). Examinations of the 'local' have been a notable feature of recent work on migration, driven in part by discussions of refugee reception (Hinger, Schäfer, & Pott, 2016; Miellet, 2022; Werner et al., 2018), municipal responses to

migration (Ataç, Schütze, & Reitter, 2020; Kos et al., 2016), and the perceived 'decoupling' of policies between national and local levels (Scholten, Engbersen, van Ostaijen, & Snel, 2018; Spencer, 2018). SMPs represent vital coordinating bodies for the multiple actors that make up 'local' migration governance. Yet, an exclusive focus on the coordination of such actors risks overlooking various forms of 'implementation gap' (Darling, 2022b) that exist between policy and practice at subnational levels, which requires attention to the power relations that underpin modes of coordination and consensus building. In this arena, discussions of multi-level governance have highlighted how a shift from government to governance relies upon interactions between a broad array of partners (Scholten et al., 2018). Yet, 'the key role of civil society' represents 'a further, underexplored factor' in such work (Spencer, 2018, p. 2048), while the multi-level governance approach has been critiqued for not adequately addressing conflicts between actors (Pettrachin, 2022), leading Ambrosini (2021:378) to suggest that greater attention be paid to 'the horizontal dimension of governance, of divergences between public and non-public actors'. It is these dynamics of convergence and divergence that this paper foregrounds as an exploration of SMPs focuses less on multi-level questions of coordination and 'decoupling', and more on the situated practice of *doing* partnership and forging fraught relationships of convergence. Rather than situating SMPs as a meso level node within a multi-level approach, this paper approaches them as 'battlegrounds' in Ambrosini's (2021:379) term, reflecting contentious fields 'in which different actors interact, sometimes cooperating and in other cases conflicting'.

Building on such work, this paper argues that SMPs reflect forms of collective enrolment within the policy field of migration that refute any straightforward narrative of cooperation or conflict. Being attentive to the power relations of making partnerships work foregrounds how actors are enrolled in ways that exceed accounts of co-option or control. Whilst public policy partnerships have often been argued to govern through frames of cooperation, consensus, and the creation of 'active' partners (Kunz, 2013; Larner & Craig, 2005), they also represent terrains of 'multiple power relations, tactics, manoeuvres, and resistance' (Kunz & Maisenbacher, 2013, p. 198). As Baker and McGuirk (2021) argue, the notion of co-option and the 'shadow state' through which civil society is enrolled into sustaining exclusionary policies, has served to obscure how voluntary organisations and civil society groups may also shape policy and mobilise the state towards their own ends. In these contexts, civil society is situated more as 'an in-between and mediating actor' (DeVerteuil et al., 2020, p. 924), than a sector uncritically co-opted by an authoritative state. Importantly, this implies recognising that enrolment as a process is distinct from co-option. Co-option reflects an appropriation or subsumption in which the interests, activities, and priorities of third sector organisations and civil society are redirected towards the aims and purpose of an authoritative actor, often the state (Tyler, Gill, Conlon, & Oeppen, 2014). Enrolment reflects a set of constrained but conscious decisions to engage with, and form part of, practices and systems of governance, with SMPs reflecting one example of these systems. Enrolment thus entails a greater degree of agency on the part of civil society, but also a greater commitment to pragmatism and compromise, performing a 'tactical closeness and proximity' to power that may produce forms of constrained resistance (Gill et al., 2014, p. 379). Considering SMPs in this way, recognises that such spaces may offer civil society actors opportunities 'to negotiate or inflect state influence, pursue independent agendas, and influence state agendas' (Trudeau, 2008, p. 672). The outcome is that enrolment produces an ambivalent politics for those outside the state but situated in 'tactical closeness' to the state (Gill et al., 2014, p. 379). Exploring the negotiations of SMPs illustrates that such ambivalence is not a position of disinterest or indifference. Rather, ambivalence reflects a position of tension between different ideals, outcomes, and friendships. In these terms, as McNevin (2013:183, original emphasis) argues, ambivalence directs attention to 'the transformative potential of claims that *both* resist *and* reinscribe the power relations associated with contemporary

hierarchies of mobility'.

Understanding SMPs in this way draws on a porous understanding of the state as an accomplishment of assembled elements to challenge the idea that the state easily co-opts outside interests to serve its agenda. As Baker and McGuirk (2021:1352) argue, thinking of the state as 'assembled' serves to draw attention to the relations between state and non-state actors, and how whilst 'voluntary organisations rarely operate from a position of relative power, their expertise and networks can be mobilised to great effect, activating the capacities of formalised state institutions in the service of voluntary sector goals'. In this vein, Axelsson and Pettersson (2021) argue that both public and private actors in migration governance undertake strategic attempts to enrol themselves and others into positions of policy influence. They conclude that 'the growing involvement of intermediary actors in the governance of international migration … is not just a state strategy for improving efficiency or inserting distance. It is equally the result of attempts by non-state actors to position themselves in relation to the state in order to influence immigration' (Axelsson & Pettersson, 2021, p. 1533). Taking this concern with the 'assembled' state forward, I argue that SMPs have developed into 'local' exemplars of the forms of strategic closeness that are marking migration governance at national and international levels.

2. Researching strategic migration partnerships

The paper is based on a project that examined the UK's asylum dispersal system, focusing on Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow, and Sunderland. Through fieldwork between October 2012 and December 2015, the project explored how changing dispersal practices impacted local authorities, refugee support organisations, advocacy groups, and asylum seekers. Most notable among these changes was the transfer of accommodation contracts from consortiums of local authorities to three private providers, the security contractors G4S, the multinational services company Serco, and the housing company Clear Springs.

To examine this changing landscape, 105 interviews were undertaken with a range of actors in asylum support. These included local authorities, policy-makers, asylum advocates and refugee support organisations, the Home Office, and asylum seekers and refugees. In addition, policy documents from local authorities, the Home Office, parliamentary enquiries, and refugee support organisations were collated to document the political relations underpinning dispersal. Documents from four SMPs formed part of this range of resources. Ethnographic observation work was undertaken at refugee support organisations in each city, and at meetings of three SMPs. Given the often contentious nature of SMP discussions, the identity of these three SMPs is anonymised, as are the identities of all interview respondents. Whilst empirical research was conducted a number of years ago, this time period was significant to the development and role of SMPs across the UK. It marked a period of turbulence as the outsourcing of asylum accommodation and support services intersected with growing tensions between local and national government over asylum. In this context, SMPs became critical 'battlegrounds' for the translation of policy. Attending the quarterly meetings of SMPs during this period gave insight into the formation and development of this contentious field. Since this period of primary research, the role of SMPs has expanded in varying ways, and ongoing collation of SMP documents and policy outputs has allowed this changing context to be traced.

This paper draws on this combination of interview materials alongside ethnographic field notes. In drawing these resources together, all interviews and field notes were transcribed alongside copies of all policy documents. The analysis that followed focused on exploring the roles of different actors within SMPs, tracing the strategic importance of SMPs in UK asylum policy, and considering how relations therein shifted with the outsourcing of asylum accommodation and support contracts.

3. The rise of strategic migration partnerships

SMPs were established across the UK as part of efforts to remodel the accommodation and support of asylum seekers in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 1999, the New Labour government announced the start of a nationwide dispersal programme through which asylum seekers would be allocated accommodation on a no-choice basis in an effort to 'spread the burden' of provision away from London and the South East of England (Home Office 1998). The development of dispersal required considerable infrastructural investment given that local authorities had limited experience of working with asylum seekers, and an emergent refugee support sector was in its infancy (Darling, 2021, 2022a; Griffiths, Sigona, & Zetter, 2006). SMPs were established as part of this 'new national machinery' to coordinate the accommodation and support of asylum seekers (Home Office 1998). Working across local and national government, and with statutory agencies and third sector input, their aim was to smooth the contours of dispersal implementation, address potential challenges, and turn policy into practice.

The development of SMPs at this point was indicative of a period in UK public policy in which partnerships were looked to for solutions to a range of challenges (Fuller & Geddes, 2008; Clarke & Glendinning, 2002). At local government level, New Labour reforms were driving a shift from government to governance, associated with the multiplication of actors involved in shaping public policy, and the embrace of a 'shadow state' of civil society organisations seeking to influence government (Geddes, 2006). In this context, 'local strategic partnerships' became essential institutions of governance, marking 'semi-autonomous organizational vehicles through which governmental, private, voluntary and community sector actors engage in the process of debating, deliberating and delivering public policy at the regional and local level' (Johnston, 2015, p. 16). The intention of such partnerships was to 'operate at a level which enables strategic decisions to be taken yet is close enough to the grassroots to allow direct community engagement' (Geddes, 2006, p. 79), thereby reflecting a desire to prioritise 'engagement' in the process of local governance.

The reality of local strategic partnerships did not bear out these hopes for democratic inclusion. Their reality was argued to be one of small and exclusive policy elites that served to crowd out broader community interests, and which worked in the shadows of local government with limited accountability (Fenwick, Miller Johnston, & McTavish, 2012; Geddes, 2006). Furthermore, it was claimed that local strategic partnerships were mechanisms for central government control as policy proposals had to pass through them, serving to filter out ideas that were not conducive to the often business-friendly elites that constituted them (Johnson & Osborne, 2003). Rather than eroding the power of the state, partnerships were accused of extending it through the integration of non-state actors into tightly controlled relations of governance (Houghton et al., 2013).

SMPs have grown and developed since the early 2000s as new areas of work have been ascribed to them. One shifting condition during this time has been the extent to which they have been supported by local government. In their original form, SMPs were based within regional consortiums of local governments who had responsibility for dispersal. Very often, this meant an SMP fell under the auspices of the largest council within a regional consortium. This was not always an easy or harmonious relationship because SMPs were tasked with coordinating asylum dispersal between local authorities and inequities of dispersal numbers between authorities were sources of tension (Darling, 2016, 2022a). At the same time, SMPs were positioned at the interface of the local governments they brought together and the Home Office who provide their funding. This intermediary role was a far from comfortable position, particularly following the outsourcing of asylum accommodation and the removal of local authorities from accommodation provision, a shift with two principal effects. First, the support and buy-in of local governments for SMPs shifted, with local government showing variable levels of commitment. For example, in the wake of outsourcing

the SMP in the North East of England ceased to function due to a lack of institutional support from local government. The SMP was resurrected after a three-year gap following pressure from refugee support organisations in the region. Second, a highly uneven landscape of SMP development and coherence emerged, with variations in the work SMPs sought to do and their ability to coordinate policy and challenge government decisions and Home Office priorities.

The realities of SMP practice today are highly variable as regional SMPs take on new competencies in distinct ways, not least in the context of devolution. Similarly, whilst SMPs were established as mechanisms for policy coordination, the extent of this coordination was, and remains, mixed in practice. It is to this role in coordination that I now turn in examining how SMPs enrol state and non-state actors into governance networks.

4. Translation, coordination, and enrolment

Since their inception, SMPs have played critical roles in communicating policy goals and intentions from the Home Office to local governments, third sector organisations, and private contractors. Key to the ability of central government to communicate through SMPs, has been the enrolment of civil society actors from the outset, beginning a process of socialisation that has shaped how 'local' contexts of policy implementation are understood.

In discussing the establishment of the SMP in Scotland, Fiona, a policy officer, outlined some of these dynamics:

> It was set up in 2000 when dispersal to Glasgow began and at that point it sat within Glasgow City Council. The money came from the Home Office and the aim of it was to coordinate the different services that were working in Glasgow to respond to the needs of asylum seekers ….Then, in 2007, the remit expanded to cover European migration and the impact of that ….So up until 2007 we were working on asylum and we would convene an operational working group that came together once a month and it involved police, education, housing … the housing providers, each of the contractors, health service, and we would have a discussion about what's happening in terms of services that are provided to asylum seekers (Fiona, interview 2013).

Similarly, in England, Farah, who was also a policy officer, discussed how the SMP in her region operated as a forum for policy coordination:

> We have a number of voluntary-sector representatives but we also bring together the Refugee Council and the local authority leads from all of the dispersal areas in the region, and G4S and the Home Office obviously, to look at ongoing issues and more strategic things around dispersal (Farah, interview 2014).

As forums for communication, SMPs could play a role in managing potential problems. For example, Alan, a local authority services manager, noted that in the Welsh context:

> One role is just being able to respond to things better and deal with problems. So if there is something that one person is struggling to resolve that could be quite easily answered by somebody round the table, as a group we can facilitate that. So sometimes it's very hard to get that person from the Home Office to come to a meeting individually but you might be able to get that answer quickly from that [SMP] meeting (Alan, interview 2013).

The communicative function of SMPs also involved navigating how policies would operate 'on the ground' in diverse regional contexts. For SMPs in Scotland and Wales, this meant translating policy into devolved political landscapes in which competencies for social care, health, and education were devolved whilst power over asylum was retained in Westminster. In Wales, Marie, an SMP policy officer, discussed how:

We tend to have 'horizon scanning' meetings to try and pick things up and inform agencies, the councils, and NGOs about challenges coming. So part of what we do is troubleshooting really. Another important thing is looking at how to make policy work when things are devolved … The devolution thing isn't always easy, we spend a fair bit of time managing tensions between the Home Office and the situation here, trying to explain why some things may not work and so on (Marie, interview 2013).

In the context of devolution, the communicative function of the SMP takes on additional weight, as SMPs represent one of the first points for considering how policy may be translated into an often complex set of devolved competencies. Concurrently, the well-documented desire of devolved authorities in Scotland and Wales to distance themselves from central government rhetoric and to appear more progressive on refugee rights added points of tension into the negotiations of SMPs (Bernhardt, 2022; Mulvey, 2018).

Tensions within SMPs were also evident when discussing the outsourcing of asylum accommodation and support contracts (Darling, 2016, 2022a). In England, Farah noted that:

It is difficult because obviously the local authorities are no longer in contract, and so you've got a private organisation that have obviously got their own objectives and aims, and they don't always work that well together, so our role has been just trying to facilitate better discussion and support everybody to come to agreements around that. That's taken up a lot of time and energy (Farah interview 2014).

Across these varied accounts, SMPs act as points of contact between the multiple public and private actors that constitute dispersal. Their emergence as partnerships at the start of dispersal speaks to this critical function in the landscape of asylum accommodation and support in the UK. At the same time as communicating policy and identifying potential challenges, Farah and Alan point to the role of SMPs in developing common understandings of policy challenges. It is here that SMPs enrol diverse actors into the process of governing asylum.

Enrolment involves the production and articulation of shared concerns and investments in coordination, a process that has been argued to typify partnerships as tools of governing. As Kunz and Maisenbacher (2013:201) argue:

The very language of 'partnership' conjures up the possibility and desirability of progressive change through the establishment of a normative consensus and a collective purpose. The emphasis is on coordinating activities to achieve more desirable outcomes, based on the assumption that the different partners have shared problems and interests that require cooperation.

Enrolling both public and private actors in common projects presents one of the critical functions of partnerships, serving to blur distinctions between 'public' and 'private' bodies and creating the conditions for shared interests. As Spencer (2022:416) argues of municipal networks, 'there can be a process of group socialisation through which network members develop common norms, expectations, trust and identities', as enrolment involves the 'routinised practice' and 'circulation of powerful supporting discourses and narratives' (McGuirk, 2000, p. 661).

Understood as such, the enrolment function of SMPs takes on two dimensions. The enrolment of local government, private contractors, and third sector organisations into a partnership exerts control over the flow and nature of information sharing. SMPs become *the* means of communication and discussion for Home Office priorities and policy and this means that being enrolled is critical to being 'in the loop'. For example, in autumn 2022, the Home Office proposed a short-lived consultation on plans to extend dispersal across the UK to all local authority areas and sought the views of third sector organisations. The consultation was widely criticised within the refugee sector as it was communicated only through SMPs. This meant that only those third sector organisations enrolled as members of SMPs were directly

consulted, serving to perpetuate the image of partnerships as representing self-contained policy 'elites' (Dahlstedt, 2009), that serve to develop and sustain consensus among selected state and non-state actors (Kalir & Wissink, 2016).

Enrolment also produces relationships that spread norms of interaction and influence how those enrolled in a partnership engage with one another. Kunz (2013:1236) refers to such mechanisms as 'technologies of agency', that influence the autonomy and actions of partners. In identifying problems, exploring how to manage policy implementation, and coordinating across organisations, SMPs instil and stabilise 'collective orientations and objectives' as civil society organisations, local government, and private contractors are 'enrolled to operate within specific frameworks of assumptions, constraints on decision-making, sets of rules, ranges of ideas and access to resources' (McGuirk, 2000, p. 653). Enrolment thus involves stabilising a set of common assumptions and conditions on what is to be discussed, what the limit of potential action is, and how different actors are positioned relative to one another. In this way, enrolment serves a number of different functions beyond the provision of a platform for communication from central government. Enrolment can support the management of dissent, as processes of socialisation create common understandings of policy 'problems' and define the contours of potential responses, acting to produce pragmatic responses but hindering more radical or transformative responses (Gerard & Weber, 2019). At the same time, enrolment may offer actors a space of 'tactical closeness and proximity' to authority (Gill et al., 2014, p. 379), through which to gain influence, reflecting a 'desire to sit at the table with state agencies' (Kalir & Wissink, 2016, p. 44). In this way, enrolment may serve to sustain and support networks of personal connection and organisational importance, offering ways to maintain the policy relevance and legitimacy of different state and non-state actors, and to secure avenues for funding that are increasingly mobilised as means of governing non-state actors (Kox & Staring, 2022). Enrolment in these latter instances may present a choice, reflecting a decision to position oneself in proximity to authority. It is to the outcomes of these relations that I turn next to consider how enrolment conditions political possibilities.

5. Buffer zones and advocacy coalitions

Practices of enrolment created not only communities of interest but also collective efforts to respond to policy challenges. In Scotland, Fiona discussed how the SMP developed such responses:

because people were working quite well together we decided to focus attention on issues where there was a need for work rather than attempting to cover all issues. One of the first issues we focused on was case resolution. We convened a group that was made up of Glasgow City Council, Home Office, Scottish government, and it was to say that these are the numbers that are coming through the case resolution process. The Home Office were able to say this is the proportion that we think are likely to be granted status. And Glasgow's able to look at its homelessness stocks, because all refugees that are granted status are entitled to homelessness assistance. So what we did was we had a group that sat down and said these are the people that are coming through, this is the housing stock that Glasgow has available and then the Home Office manage their decision-making so that those people were able to get into homelessness accommodation as quickly as possible (Fiona, interview 2013).

In this instance, enrolment enables the establishment of common concerns and the identification of collaborative responses. The practice described here, of coordinating between the Home Office, Scottish government, and local authorities to address challenges around accommodation provision, relies upon the SMP acting as a foundation for discussions of how these different actors can use the discretion they possess to identify solutions. This provides one example of the potential value of 'tactical closeness' that enrolment can produce, enabling the

identification of 'nontrivial improvements and alterations to existing practices and procedures', which, whilst far from radical, can offer support to those facing the hostility of exclusionary state practices (Gill et al., 2014).

Such forms of local authority discretion were narrowed following the outsourcing of asylum accommodation, but enrolment for local authorities did still offer the potential for a stronger voice within policy-making and implementation. In the midlands, James, a councillor, noted that one important function of the SMP was in;

> allowing local authorities to group together and to argue for parity between councils when it came to dispersal numbers. G4S have found it hard to get enough properties at the right price to fulfil the contract and so they've moved into new areas, into Stoke, Wolverhampton, and Walsall, but councils want to know what to expect and see that they're not taking more than their neighbours, so the SMP gives a chance for that to happen and for councils to put a common voice to G4S and the Home Office about concerns, like the quality of housing or impact on services (James, interview 2014).

In a fractured system of governance, the ability of local authorities to respond collectively to the Home Office and private contractors was significant. In this instance, we see the shifting nature of 'horizontal relations' between actors in partnerships, as alliances between local authorities can support the formation of 'advocacy coalitions' in public policy (Ataç et al., 2020:118). Refugee support organisations can also play a critical role here in collaborating with local government to push for supportive measures towards asylum seekers and refugees whilst allowing local government to transfer the risks of subverting national policy to these non-governmental partners.

From a governmental perspective such enrolment could be valuable in allowing local authorities to be managed collectively. This function was noted by Stuart, a Home Office policy officer, who reflected on how his department engaged with local authorities:

> I meet them occasionally, larger scale meetings where I have 16 different councillors, I think in the past it was more individual, and individuals would come to the Home Office with issues and concerns, and we'd deal with that individual problem whereas now, if one group comes to me, I have to make sure that whatever I respond is very similar to what I'm going to do with the others, because I know for a fact that I'll be at a meeting in a few weeks, and they'll all be asking the same kind of question. Strategic Migration Partnerships are very helpful, because they do act as a little bit of a buffer, so they tend to get all the grief before it even comes to me (Stuart, interview 2014).

Stuart highlights the mediating function of the SMP as a 'buffer' between local government concerns and the Home Office. Whilst outsourced contractors such as G4S and Serco act as buffers through displacing accountability (Darling, 2016, 2022a), SMPs provides a further measure of protection for government policy. SMPs allow the frustrations and concerns of local government to find a forum but also enable central government to coordinate and prepare responses, serving to manage dissent and disagreement. This buffer role contributes to an interpretation of SMPs as 'soft spaces' of governance (Haughton et al., 2013), in which the nature of partnership produces mediation but often little significant change. As Farah noted in the context of her SMP:

> our role has become really doing that facilitation and enabling and finding out what we can do to bring people together. The frustration is then being able to do some real policy work and shape things because we just don't have the capacity, and where we see that things are not working and things haven't gone to plan we're not in a position to impose penalties, so we then have to go back to the Home Office and that takes a long time (Farah interview 2014).

As buffers for Home Office engagement, SMPs allow for the views of diverse actors in asylum to be articulated and discussed, and at times to

influence the decisions of private contractors and the Home Office, but on a limited range of issues (Darling, 2016). The facilitative function of SMPs that Farah highlights is removed from the ability to directly shape the actions of those running dispersal. This is where the limits of partnerships lie, limits imposed by the inability to enforce actions, to impose penalties, or to have the capacity for longer term policy work.

Enrolment can thus produce tensions as different actors pursue their own interests and may come into conflict with the priorities, and policies, of the state. However, as Axelsson and Pettersson (2021:1535) highlight, the 'enrolling strategies' that migration partnerships produce involve 'the capacity of independent state and non-state actors to position themselves close to, and work with others to shape migration'. SMPs provide mediated relationships between governance actors and enable those actors to sustain 'relationships of proximity and presence' (ibid:1536) relative to central government authority. At the same time, the authority of central government, and its capacity to enact and sustain its policy priorities, is sustained and enhanced by enrolling regional and 'local' actors into proximate and manageable relations. The 'buffer' that SMPs may offer to central government reflects the ability to shape those relations of proximity, with SMP's serving as one of the governmental means through which local authorities, third sector organisations, and refugee community organisations are brought into 'reach' for the Home Office, reflecting Allen's (2016) typological account of 'productive power' as the capacity to shape decisions through drawing some actors and issues close and making others distant. Proximity emerges through SMPs not just in the physical and social connections developed via regular meetings and networking, but also in the development of shared understandings of common issues and the articulation of shared responsibilities that emerge as an outcome of these discussions.

It should be noted that SMPs are not always successful in this enrolment endeavour, and the outcomes of discussion are not always harmonious. Rather, SMPs also reflect moments of tension and disentangling, as shared understandings break down. Being enrolled was not always comfortable for third sector organisations and local authorities. As Will, a refugee support worker, discussed:

> I think the way the strategic migration partnership has colluded on some issues is a real detriment actually, it's had some positive roles, but my view is that they've colluded with the border agency too much....They're supposed to focus on the needs of asylum seekers, but the border agency has tried to play off partners and that's meant some in the third sector have decided not to engage the border agency or challenge them. At one point, all border agency communication was being sent out through the strategic migration partnership, so that says something about how independent they are (Will, interview 2015).

Whilst the tactical closeness of the SMP could be of value to some partners, there were costs to enrolment. For refugee support organisations one of those costs was the risk of being perceived as operating too closely alongside the Home Office and potentially restricting dissent as a result (Kox & Staring, 2022; Tyler et al., 2014). Whilst the collective enrolment of multiple actors and voices into an SMP might offer a 'buffer' for individual organisations and local authorities, individual partners were still situated in often uncomfortable relationships with central government and outsourced private contractors on the one hand, and with refugee support organisations situated outside the 'policy elites' of SMPs on the other. These relations point to an ambivalent politics as tensions within SMPs placed partner organisations under strain.

6. The politics of ambivalence

In examining the SMP as a 'buffer' for different interests some of the frustrations underpinning relations of tactical closeness and socialisation are brought to the fore. In these contexts, the process of enrolment produces an ambivalent politics on the part of third sector

organisations and local government, situated at the tension point between a desire for proximity and influence and a desire for critical distance and autonomy. SMPs create dilemmas of closeness. The outcome is that many partners occupy a space of ambivalent politics in which these 'battlegrounds' of asylum become forums for an internal conflict over how best to respond to policy in the immediate term, seek to influence change in the medium term, and retain a focus on more systemic transformation in the longer term.

Politically, ambivalence has been taken to inform analyses of migrant decision-making, the relations of civil society organisations, and forms of migrant rights claims (Belloni, 2019; Boccagni & Kivisto, 2019; Mescoli & Roblain, 2021). In this latter context, ambivalence has been considered less as a problematic or uncertain state, and more as a 'political resource' focused on the indeterminacy of political claims that 'cannot be captured on a register of subjection-agency that corresponds to an inside-outside relation with respect to sovereign power and normative regimes' (McNevin, 2013, p. 197). In these terms, ambivalence is not 'a synonym of ambiguity, inconsistency, uncertainty, or disorientation' (Boccagni & Kivisto, 2019, p. 6), but rather has a distinctive character reflecting the coexistence of opposing perspectives, assuming that 'people can hold both positive and negative views simultaneously, or if not precisely at the same moment, at least in close temporal proximity' (ibid:5). In the context of refugee support organisations' involvement in SMPs, ambivalence reflects an uncomfortable position of opposing perspectives, combining elements of proximity and distance, in which actors are enrolled into partnership and seek to effect change through this position, but often in ways that sustain the current governance of asylum. In enrolment, ambivalence is produced because practices of socialisation create networks of friendship and affinity, often both professionally and personally, whilst at the same time channelling and directing the forms that contestation can take. Boccagni and Kivisto (2019:11) suggest that analytically ambivalence provides a lens onto 'societal complexity' as the concept serves as a 'bridge between the level of individual emotional life and that of overarching social structures', and it is this connection point that is significant for understanding the politics of SMPs. The battlegrounds of asylum policy are difficult places to inhabit precisely because of these interwoven dynamics of personal connection, political orientation, and state and non-state authority, reflecting the fraught emotional negotiations that have been argued to mark sites of 'intimate geopolitics', such as spaces of befriending and hosting within repressive asylum systems (Askins, 2016; Darling, 2022a). It is with these connections in mind that I focus on one further transition point within UK asylum support.

In 2014, following the outsourcing of asylum accommodation, contracts for support and advice services to asylum seekers across the UK were centralised and passed to one provider, Migrant Help. Prior to this, advice had been provided by a range of organisations, with Refugee Action, the Refugee Council, and the Scottish and Welsh Refugee Councils providing support in different regions. These organisations offered support through service hubs that enabled asylum seekers to receive face-to-face advice, and drop-in signposting and guidance for other services. The centralisation of services with Migrant Help meant not only a transfer of funding, but also altered the nature of support for asylum seekers. The new Migrant Help model represented a nationwide contract to offer advice through a combination of regional offices, a website, and a national telephone helpline.

Based around six national call centres and with the advice line offering translation into fifteen languages, the transition from face-to-face support to the more remote Migrant Help model was not an easy one. John, a local authority housing officer, reflected on some of these challenges in the North East of England:

> Yeah, I don't think that has been the most resounding success. That's just symptomatic of the approach, that people don't care, they've got a centre or something and it's miles away, you know, it just doesn't work with the issues you've got, it's got to be a lot more tangible.

And without support groups helping people through, people are just left hanging (John, interview 2014).

Concerns over the extent to which the model of phoneline assistance developed by Migrant Help would work in practice were widespread among asylum advocates. First, was a fear that the model would be ineffective and harmful as asylum seekers and refugees would be unable to access support reliably over the phone, would have to repeat potentially traumatic information and personal details with each call, and would fall back on the now unfunded in-person services they were more familiar with. Second, was a concern that the capacity of Migrant Help to sustain a national support service was in serious doubt.

These varied concerns from across the refugee sector came to the fore in SMP meetings during the period of transition to the Migrant Help model. At one English SMP, the announcement of the new contracts was a moment of considerable tension:

> The meeting started with a short introduction from the Home Office. They outlined how they had been asked to find savings on asylum support contracts and as a result the system had been put out to tender. The bid from Migrant Help had been successful. As the Home Office finish their introduction to the Migrant Help model, the representative from Migrant Help sitting next to them looks increasingly uncomfortable. The floor is opened for questions, and there is a brief pause before Gareth, an RCO [refugee community organisation] representative, says 'Well, I'll say what a lot of us are probably thinking, this won't work. But it's done now so I guess we're here just to talk about what happens next' (SMP Meeting, 20th March 2014).

This was the first of a series of meetings in which the Migrant Help transition dominated SMP discussion, and it became increasingly clear that this new model was not working. Migrant Help phone lines were overwhelmed with demand, staff were not adequately trained in identifying and dealing with vulnerable clients, and other refugee support organisations reported significant increases in requests for their time and support. In SMPs, Migrant Help now occupied a role as the sole provider of support and, alongside private accommodation contractors, were one of only four organisations directly working with the Home Office. Just as the outsourcing of asylum accommodation impacted relations of authority and influence between local and central government (Darling, 2022b), so the contracting of Migrant Help reworked relations between the Home Office and refugee support organisations, prioritising one contract over a far more mixed approach.

Within SMPs the challenges of this transition produced ambivalence for multiple reasons. As Tony, from a regional refugee charity, noted:

> Migrant Help is difficult because we all know [Sarah] and so people are less willing to put the boot in … Right now Migrant Help are in the shit and the Home Office know it, the Home Office have the contract and they're using it to beat Migrant Help with, to push them further and further. So Migrant Help have to go back to the people with experience and get them to do whatever is needed to make it work (Tony interview, 2014).

Reflecting on the Migrant Help transition, Tony highlights important elements of the SMP's role as a network of 'people with experience'. First, with intense pressure on Migrant Help to deliver, they were forced to rely upon other refugee support organisations to fill gaps in provision and to work collaboratively to meet advice needs. In practice, this meant establishing agreements to support some face-to-face services provided by other refugee support organisations as a means to fill gaps in provision and agreeing to show discretion around the deadlines for support applications to allow support to be maintained in contexts where it would otherwise have been withdrawn. Discretionary and insecure in nature, this support was a negotiated compromise designed to 'make it work' in the short term. One outcome of this pragmatism was the production of an uneven system of localised support, as alliances of interests

and a willingness to fill gaps varied between SMP regions. Far from creating a consistent and uniform experience of advice across the country, the demands of the Migrant Help contract initially produced a need for localised additional support. In this arena, SMPs acted as the forums for negotiating and managing a landscape of advice provision that was unstable throughout its transition and uneven in its development.

Part of that negotiated compromise is highlighted in Tony's suggestion that members of the SMP were 'less willing to put the boot in' to Migrant Help because of the individual involved. Sarah was the representative for Migrant Help and had worked in the refugee sector for over ten years with a series of other organisations and had developed personal relationships with many of those in the room from local authorities and the third sector. Her move to work for Migrant Help was not without criticism from her peers, but shared history with those in the SMP afforded Sarah some degree of leeway to address the challenges Migrant Help faced.

This model of employing expertise is common in processes of privatisation and can serve to legitimate the presence of new contractors in a given field (Crouch, 2016). Yet it also highlights how SMPs are institutions of shared knowledge and commonalities that accrue over time and that come to shape present claims to authority. Sarah's new role may position her across the table from her former colleagues, but traces of her past positions still show through, partly to highlight the contingency of present claims to authority, and partly to illustrate the relation to past knowledge, expertise, and networks that built these forms of authority in the first place. Whilst discussions of a 'local turn' in migration governance have highlighted the confluence of actors shaping policy development (Ambrosini, 2021; Miellet, 2022), the often *personal* nature of these connections between individuals has been largely unexamined. Partnerships such as SMPs bring these relations to the fore because the 'local' arenas of governance and policy that they help to constitute are relatively narrow networks of organisations and individuals, with local, and even national, refugee sectors being made up of individuals who have histories of working together in multiple roles. Personal connections of this kind have been argued to be central to forms of activism and solidarity (Wilson, 2017), and to modes of everyday support and friendship (Askins, 2014), but are less readily recognised or discussed in the prosaic work of coordinating governance. Yet as Larner and Craig (2005:418) highlight, the tendency for individuals within governance partnerships to move between positions and roles is part of how partnerships operate and how they sustain and reproduce a set of policy goals and outcomes. In the case of the SMP discussed here, Sarah's shifting role, from working for refugee support organisations that were part of the SMP to representing Migrant Help within the SMP, reflects a shifting position that is legitimated by her prior involvement in, and knowledge of, the 'local' refugee sector and her personal connections with other figures in this sector.

In a context of considerable constraints on how far asylum policy can be transformed at a 'local' level, the personal connections and networks of enrolment that sustain SMPs produce ambivalent political positions for many refugee support organisations. In Tony's case this ambivalence was expressed through a willingness to not 'put the boot in' to Sarah and to offer forms of negotiated support on the basis of a shared history, whilst recognising that doing so would help to sustain a system that had been contractually underfunded and was ill-suited to the needs of asylum seekers. It is this tension that Will was referring to when he argued that SMPs were too complicit in their relation to the Home Office and had lost sight of 'the needs of asylum seekers'. The connections of SMPs have the potential to influence policy through pragmatic responses to problems, but the very nature of these partnerships as close-knit groups of collaboration ensure that dissent is managed in ways that do not make 'too much fuss' (Horton & Kraftl, 2009). Transformation at the 'local' level is limited by the constrained horizons and personal interconnections of partnerships as modes of governing. It is for this reason that SMPs occupy an ambivalent position within the politics of

asylum, as spaces of progressive potential on the one hand and sites of managed cooperation and state-sanctioned coordination on the other. SMPs are critical tools in the governing of asylum, not only for translating Home Office priorities into local contexts, but also for their ability to shape the relations of the refugee support sector. As points of contact between multiple actors, SMPs are both 'battlegrounds' of asylum and sites of pragmatic, and often friendly, connection and network building. In such spaces, we witness the ambivalences of governing and supporting asylum.

7. Conclusion

In offering a first critical discussion of strategic migration partnerships this paper has considered how tensions characterise the practice of governing through partnerships. On the one hand, SMPs operate to enable the translation of policy messages to a diverse audience of state and non-state actors. In these terms, SMPs have been critical to the maintenance of the system of dispersal that marks asylum accommodation and support in the UK. On the other hand, SMPs may support the maintenance of those networks of friendship, connection and affinity that allow forms of discretionary action and concession from local government and refugee support organisations, such that SMPs provide ground for forms of 'implicit activism' and collective advocacy. In discussions of a 'local turn' in migration governance, the practices and decisions of local authorities are often juxtaposed with civil society initiatives, with a growing focus on forms of 'insurgent' urban policymaking (Bazurli & Kaufmann, 2023), and 'institutional solidarity' (Agustin & Jørgensen, 2019), that point to areas of alliance between local governments and civil society. SMPs present some of these potential points of coalition, not least in supporting 'nontrivial improvements' to current practice (Gill et al., 2014). However, they also highlight that these points of potential are often fraught, are situated within governmental frames of reference, and involve multiple points of ambivalence as a result. Exploring SMPs through enrolment highlights how ambivalence emerges from the forms of relational closeness that enrolment produces.

Concurrently, SMPs also highlight how intimate connections are enfolded into the process of managing asylum. Intimacy in this case reflects more than simply a form of proximity or closeness that may be tactically mobilised for governmental or oppositional purposes. Instead, intimacy addresses the interwoven nature of personal biographies, narratives, and networks into the governance practice of SMPs, such that friendships and processes of socialisation are entangled into ambivalent relations of proximity to the state. This is to take seriously the 'peopled' nature of migration governance, both in terms of how governance decisions are made and discretion exercised, and in how that very process of enrolment, decision-making, and socialisation is bound up with feelings of affinity, connection, and often disappointment or frustration. SMPs are interpersonal spaces of connection and socialisation as much as they are communication channels for central government and the relations formed through them are critical in shaping how 'local' contexts of asylum policy are constituted. As I have argued, partnership working in migration governance is indicative of a form of closeness, both politically and often personally, that demonstrates how state and non-state actors are able to 'reach' into, and help to constitute, 'local' contexts of asylum and migration (Allen, 2016). In a growing range of cases across the world these relationships, whether strictly defined or loosely articulated in alliances, memoranda of understanding, and practices of humanitarian 'borderwork', are shaping how local and national authorities 'manage' migration (Daniş & Nazli, 2019; Missbach, Adiputera, & Prabandari, 2018). In this context, understanding the converging interests and interpersonal connections of governance partnerships is critical to unpacking how they succeed, or fail, in constructing common understandings of migration and shared political imaginaries of future policies and practices.

At the same time, as Schroeder (2021:487) argues, intimacy is often

'a destabilizing force that tends to change assumptions and intentions', as it draws to the fore 'the potential for feelings and interpersonal relationships to effect political change at other scales' (Pain & Staeheli, 2014, p. 346). The intimacies of SMPs reflect patterns of agency and constraint in which possibilities for discretion and collective action are built upon histories of shared experience, past friendships, and the lingering presence of past selves and (inter)personal biographies (Askins, 2014, p. 354). In addressing the 'assembled state' as a 'peopled state', it is critical to question how the fraught intimacies of partnerships shape practices of governance, and how intimate ties play a critical role in assembling, and sustaining, the state. Beyond this, there is a need to more fully explore how practices of enrolment are *felt* by diverse actors, as expressions of authority that are personal as well as governmental (Cooper, 2019). In their ongoing governmental role, SMPs continue to offer fertile grounds for understanding the changing nature of governance relationships. These 'battlegrounds' of asylum are also forums of friendship, frustrated compromise, and an often-ambivalent politics of tactical advocacy and strategic coalition.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jonathan Darling: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

Declarations of interest: none.

Acknowledgements

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