

Building on Diversity

The costs to society of social exclusion and marginalisation are becoming increasingly apparent. Providing a secure home in a welcoming environment for those persons the UK has granted the protection of refugee status, offers one opportunity to build more integrated and sustainable communities.

Refugees typically arrive in the UK without money, anywhere to live or little ability to speak English. Having suffered or feared persecution in their own countries, they are often traumatised, isolated and disorientated. A settled and secure home is key to rebuilding their lives and becoming part of the local community. For many, however, the reality in their country of refuge is that they face public animosity, homelessness or living in overcrowded housing conditions and, for an increasing number, destitution.

Housing is the starting point

Housing is a central issue in relation to asylum and refugee issues in the UK. Not only is its availability the driver for dispersal of asylum seekers, it is also the key to effective resettlement and integration of those who asylum claims are recognised and who are then granted refugee status. It forms the basis from which they can rebuild their lives, with access to employment, education and training. Refugees only become eligible for settled housing and support benefits once they have received a positive decision on their asylum application. At this point, they have only 28 days to leave the government provided accommodation and find somewhere else to live. Not an easy task for anyone! Many refugees prefer to leave their dispersal areas to go to other areas, typically the larger cities, where there are people from their own ethnic community and where there are more vibrant economies and a greater chance of obtaining employment. This serves to add to the housing pressures in those cities and means that the refugees have reduced rights as a result of having lost their local connection.

There are many reasons why refugees are inadequately housed, not least the shortage of good quality affordable housing for the population in general. Poor partnership working between local stakeholders and government departments and local community tensions add to the difficulties faced by refugees. Racial harassment can be a major problem, particularly on some social housing estates. In many cases, refugees have little choice but to live in higher cost private rental accommodation, in order to feel safer living in the anonymity of ordinary streets.

The key areas of action needed to begin to address some of these issues include:

- recognising refugees as assets within their local communities;
- providing opportunities for better community integration and cohesion in dispersal areas;

- encouraging integrated action within government and improved partnership working;
- addressing the dire shortage of information of where and how refugees are living in the UK today.

Recognising refugees as assets

Refugees arrive in the UK with capabilities as well as needs. Many are highly entrepreneurial and are concerned to become independent of any state support as soon as possible and to be a benefit to the society that welcomed them. Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) are run by and for refugees, providing advice and support, often informally, and acting as bridges to mainstream services. They have the advantages of knowing where their community members live, of speaking the language, of understanding the problems faced and having the trust of the community members who are often fearful of authorities. RCOs have long played an important role within their own communities and their value to the wider community is also now beginning to be recognised. They are vital in helping to form links with other community residents and help refugees to play a role in the development of their local communities. Continuing to build the skills and capacity of small RCOs is essential if they are to develop to their greatest potential.

Providing opportunities for better community integration and cohesion

Local refugee organisations have found that providing incentives such as good housing, training and employment opportunities, as well as good refugee-friendly local services encourages people to settle and get involved in dispersal areas. This fosters the creation of mixed communities, as well as contributing to the regeneration of the area. Experience has shown the following approaches are successful in improving the opportunities and possibilities for strong integration and cohesion:

- Investing in local communities before the arrival of refugees or asylum seekers to help ensure that good services are available to all equally, to avoid tensions that arise if it appears that new arrivals are getting a better deal than local people are.
- Involving local decision makers and media in a positive manner.
- Being honest with the host community as to the opportunities and possible problems.
- Developing refugee advice/information packs that detail the training, services, amenities and support available, thus enabling refugees to make informed decisions about an area.
- Using opportunities such as sports and arts activities and community regeneration projects as a focus for shared activity.
- Encouraging refugees to participate in public life by standing for positions such as school governors or registering to vote.
- Providing positive choices to refugees as to where they live.

Working in partnership

If refugees are to be successfully housed and integrated within their dispersal areas, it is essential to ensure that there is effective partnership working with all the local stakeholders to provide an appropriate and effective refugee support infrastructure. Work carried out by the Housing Associations Charitable Trust (hact) aims to improve refugee access to housing by supporting local partnerships made up of RCOs, housing providers, local authorities and other agencies. Lesson learned to date include:

- Partnerships need a shared vision and time to develop
- It is necessary to share expertise and resources to build the capacity of all providers.
- Large agencies are failing to recognise and utilise the expertise and resources of community-based groups
- Poor planning and coordination persists in many areas.

An example of successful partnership working is Bolton Community Homes, which was established in 2002 to deliver Bolton's housing and refugee integration strategies. The city's success in accommodating and supporting its new communities may be attributed to its proactive approach in collaborating with refugee communities and the cross-party support received from local politicians. This is reflected in the fact that Bolton has the lowest level of reported attacks on asylum seekers in the north of England.

Information and misinformation

Given that immigration issues have an extremely high profile in the UK, there is surprisingly little evidence, knowledge or understanding about the situations faced by refugees and their host communities. There is scarcely any consistent information on the number of refugees living in any one place, their settlement patterns or their skills, training and qualifications, nor of their living conditions and the extent of interaction with their host communities.

It is hardly surprising therefore, that misinformation thrives, with widespread misreporting of issues around migration, asylum and refugees. There is little understanding of the economic advantages brought by refugees to their local communities or of examples where local people and refugees are working together for the overall benefit of their communities. The nature, quality and consistency of information provided to refugees themselves also need to be addressed and RCOs can play a valuable role here. Of particular value would be an understanding of the costs of **not** addressing community tensions. It is likely that these will far outweigh the investment needed to ensure our communities are well integrated.

Getting our act together ...

If refugees are to be adequately housed, their needs should be integrated into mainstream housing policy and delivery at local, regional and national levels. In particular, refugee housing issues should be included in regional housing strategies, homelessness strategies,

Supporting People strategies and other national, regional and local initiatives. There also needs to be better coordination between government departments and between government at local, regional and central levels. The current lack of an integrated and co-ordinated framework is a major barrier to effective policy development and implementation, which cannot come too soon, both for our refugees themselves and for society as a whole.

This article is drawn from the report produced as a result of a Consultation organised by the Building and Social Housing Foundation at St. George's House in Windsor Castle. Copies of the publication 'Building on Diversity: Providing homes for refugees and strengthening communities' can be found at www.bshf.org , together with executive summaries outlining recommendations for action by central government and social housing providers.