



# BUILDING ON DIVERSITY

PROVIDING HOMES FOR REFUGEES AND STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES

CONSULTATION AT ST GEORGE'S HOUSE, WINDSOR CASTLE  
20<sup>TH</sup> - 22<sup>ND</sup> JUNE 2006

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# Introduction

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.

There is little recognition that refugees arrive in the UK with capabilities as well as needs and that, once settled, have much to contribute to society. Although they are typically portrayed as an unnecessary drain on stretched resources, some refugees are highly entrepreneurial and most are concerned to become independent of state support as soon as possible and to be a benefit to the society that has welcomed them. The economic, cultural and social contributions that refugees make to their local communities are rarely identified.

The real dangers to society of social exclusion and marginalisation are only now beginning to become apparent and the costs of not addressing community tension can far outweigh the investment needed to ensure our communities are well integrated.

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The knowledge, skills, resources and commitment of the refugees as well as individuals and organisations in the host community lie at the heart of the integration process and these need to be more effectively identified and used.

The Consultation at St George's House was organised by the Building and Social Housing Foundation (BSHF) to consider the action to be taken if refugees are to be better housed and live in more welcoming and cohesive communities. Persons of experience and expertise were brought together from around the world in order to share and develop ideas as to how to meet this challenge.

This is the first in the current series of three annual Consultations being organised by BSHF, which set

out to look at how the housing needs of those marginalised within our society can be better addressed. The Consultation in 2007 will be concerned with issues relating to provision for Gypsies and Travellers, and the one in 2008 will be concerned with how accommodation is provided for migrant workers in the UK.

A set of recommendations for action has been drawn up as a result of the deliberations of the participants at the Consultation, setting out clearly how housing providers and public agencies can work together with refugees, local communities, NGOs and the private sector to deliver housing and support to refugee communities that not only improves lives but also releases potential and helps create more cohesive communities.

The recommendations are set out on pages 33-37 and address the five key areas for action identified at the Consultation:

- Establishing national, regional and local strategic frameworks to encourage integrated action in support of refugees.
- Incorporating refugee integration within new policy development.
- Identifying assets and building capacity of refugees and refugee community organisations.
- Fostering partnership-working to achieve local action.
- Carrying out research to improve understanding and raise awareness of the assets and needs of refugees.

Contact points for organisations mentioned in the text, and others, can be found on pages 38-41.





# Providing homes for refugees in the UK

## Who is defined as a refugee?

The media and public typically use the labels 'asylum seeker,' 'migrant,' 'immigrant' and 'refugee' interchangeably and this has led to widespread confusion and misunderstanding.

An **asylum seeker** is a person who has left his/her country and applied for recognition as a refugee in another country, claiming persecution in their own country.

A **refugee** is a person who, having claimed asylum is recognised as a refugee under the legal definition established by Article 1 of the Geneva Convention 1951<sup>1</sup>. If applicants do not meet the criteria, they may qualify for either Humanitarian Protection (HP) or Discretionary Leave to Remain (DLR) status.

In 2005, seven per cent of 25,720 asylum applicants were granted refugee status and a further ten per cent were given further leave to remain either on HP or DLR grounds. For the remainder of this document all three categories of granted asylum claimant will be referred to as a refugee. A further 6,080 applicants were granted refugee status on appeal in 2005.

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The main countries of origin for refugees in recent years have been Zimbabwe, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan and China<sup>2</sup>. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there are 290,000 refugees in the UK, accounting for 0.5 per cent of the UK population and three per cent of the world's ten million refugees<sup>3</sup>. In 2005, the vast majority of non-UK citizens entering the UK arrived from the EU accession countries and only five per cent were refugees<sup>4</sup>.

From March 2005, those granted refugee status are no longer given indefinite leave to remain as had happened previously, but rather their case is reviewed after five years. It is only at this point that the refugee may be granted indefinite leave to remain<sup>5</sup>. Refugee agencies are concerned that the shift towards more temporary and insecure forms of protection will exacerbate feelings of uncertainty and trauma, as well as frustrating the integration process<sup>6</sup>.

1. According to Article 1 of the Geneva Convention 1951, a refugee is defined as a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country.
2. Asylum in the UK, an IPPR Fact File, IPPR, 2005
3. Asylum Trends in Industrialised Countries, UNHCR, 2005
4. Rebuilding Lives - Groundwork: Progress report on refugee employment, National Refugee Integration Forum, 2006
5. Controlling our Borders: Making Migration Work for Britain: Five year strategy for asylum and integration, 2005
6. UK Asylum Law and Process, Asylum in the UK: forms of protection, Refugee Council Info Centre, 2005

Many refugees have a higher level of educational attainment than average in their host community, as well as being relatively younger and often more entrepreneurial in attitude. They often experience a combination of the following hardships upon arrival in the UK:

- Little or no ability to speak English.
- Feelings of isolation, disorientation and insecurity.
- No money, no clothes, no home.
- Fear of authorities and anxiety about government proposals.
- Lack of familiarity with British customs and practices.
- Discrimination and racism.
- Depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.

### **How do we house our refugees?**

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 settlement and integration of those granted refugee status. It forms the basis from which they can rebuild their lives with access to employment, education and training. However, housing shortages and affordability are also major problems in large areas of the country, exacerbating the problems encountered by refugees.

The way in which those seeking asylum in the UK are housed has changed significantly in recent years. Prior to 2000, asylum seekers were housed primarily in temporary accommodation in London and the South East. The shortage of accommodation and the disproportionate burden placed on a few local authorities in this area led to increasing difficulties as numbers of asylum seekers rose. In response to this, a new government policy was put in place and the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) was established within the Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate to disperse newly arrived destitute asylum seekers to areas away from London and the South East, where there was a greater supply of accommodation. Most of these areas of lower housing demand were also areas of high deprivation where resources were already under pressure and services were stretched. Since 2003, in addition to proving they are destitute, asylum seekers have been required to demonstrate that they applied for asylum as soon as reasonably practicable after entering the UK, in order to receive NASS accommodation and /or subsistence support.

Accommodation and other support arrangements for asylum seekers are negotiated under contract, through a mixture of competitive tendering and direct negotiation processes with a combination of local authority consortia, registered social landlords, private sector accommodation providers and voluntary sector agencies. Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) have not been as involved in this process as expected despite encouragement from both the Housing Corporation and the National Housing Federation (NHF).

Refugees only become eligible for settled housing and other support benefits once they have received a positive decision on their asylum application.

Ironically, it is at this point that housing often becomes a major problem, as the newly recognised refugee has only 28 days to leave the NASS-provided accommodation and to find alternative accommodation in the public, private or voluntary sector and claim appropriate benefits or possibly access rent deposits or rent guarantee schemes. Due to the demand for social housing generally, applications for social housing may not result in an offer of accommodation for many months or years, if at all. And although refugees are eligible for assistance under the homelessness legislation, many single people will not be entitled to accommodation in this way because they will not fall within a 'priority need' category. This situation causes great anxiety and can often result in newly accepted refugees sleeping on floors and sofas of community members or, in some cases, living on the streets<sup>7</sup>.

Under housing legislation in England and Wales, refugees who have been provided with accommodation by NASS will have established a local connection with the area where NASS accommodation was last provided for them. This means that they may be referred back to that area if they seek homelessness assistance in a different area. However, many refugees prefer to move to other areas where people from the same ethnic community live in order to feel safer and more supported, and also to increase the chances of finding employment. Whilst some refugees know that finding accommodation there may be more difficult and expensive and moving often leads to overcrowding, hidden homelessness and destitution, others do not. There is nothing to prevent refugees from applying for social housing in any area of their choice, but housing authorities may give them lower preference for an allocation until they establish a local connection there.

Recent studies have shown that living in neighbourhoods with a more limited history of minority ethnic settlement makes you more prone to harassment, abuse and violence<sup>8</sup>. Those refugees who can afford to live in less deprived neighbourhoods experience less racial discrimination. There is an assumption in public policy that mixed communities promote community cohesion, but this is not necessarily borne out by the evidence<sup>9</sup>. There are also many areas of tension between long-term resident Black, Minority and Ethnic (BME) communities and refugees, mostly arising from pressure on scarce resources. Reviewing the allocation of funding would help to foster cooperation rather than competition between these groups.

Public policy increasingly considers such concentrations of ethnic groupings as a cause for concern. In addition, housing pressures in areas refugees tend to move to, led the Government to change the local connection rules that form a part of homelessness legislation, so as to discourage movement away from dispersal areas. However, these areas of lower housing demand may experience high levels of deprivation, with few employment opportunities and overstretched and inadequate support services. If there were better chances of finding employment and a sense of belonging, refugees might make different choices about their dispersal areas.

Local asylum seeker and refugee consortia have found that providing incentives such as good housing, training and employment opportunities as well as good refugee-friendly local services also encourages people to settle and get involved in dispersal areas, enabling the creation of mixed communities<sup>10</sup>, as well as contributing to the regeneration of the area.

7. Destitution Amongst Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK, ICAR Briefing, Information Centre on Asylum and Refugees, May 2006

8. Neighbourhood Experiences of New Immigration: Reflections from the evidence base, by D. Robinson and K. Reeve, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006

9. The Search for Community Cohesion: Key themes and dominant concepts of the public policy agenda, D. Robinson, 2005

10. Hact consultation response to the Home Office report 'Integration Matters: A national strategy for refugee integration', hact, 2004

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Refugees do not require significantly different housing provision than the population in general, although there is a greater need for larger properties amongst some groups. In the transition from asylum support to mainstream support following a positive decision there needs to be a range of provision and choice – some refugees may want settled homes and others, especially young single people, may benefit from supported housing projects, such as foyers. Community safety is, however, a crucial issue for all refugees and racial harassment can be a major problem, particularly on some social housing estates. In many cases, refugees – even those deemed to be in priority need, and thus able to access social housing – have little choice but to live in higher cost private rental accommodation, in order to feel safer living in the anonymity of ordinary streets.

Delays in securing a national insurance number are a problem for some refugees and this creates problems in accessing benefits, including housing benefits. Access to sufficient funds for a rent deposit is also a major barrier to finding a home.

Even if they find settled accommodation relatively quickly, refugees can still face a range of problems including:

- Lack of income or savings to buy furniture and other household basics.
- No experience and limited language skills to fill in forms and apply for benefits to which they are now entitled.
- Budgeting and managing money to pay utility and other household bills.
- Lack of familiarity of how things work, e.g. obtaining a TV licence, using the postal system etc.

For settled rather than newly arrived refugees, their choice of where to live may also be influenced by their social background or aspirations.

### **Housing as the key to successful integration**

As well as providing shelter from the elements, housing also provides security for its occupants and a sense of belonging through having a place to call one's own. It is widely recognised that housing is of fundamental importance to the process of integration<sup>11</sup>. It is the first and largest problem that newly recognised refugees have to face and is often a prerequisite to obtaining permanent employment.

11. Integration Matters: A national strategy for refugee integration, Home Office, 2005



The government has introduced a range of programmes to improve the support provided to newly accepted refugees, including refugee integration loans (from the end of 2006), the Time Together programme which provides volunteer mentors for refugees, the Gateway Protection Programme and Sunrise (Strategic Upgrade of National Refugee Integration Services) programme.

The Gateway Protection Programme aims to welcome 500 refugees a year to the UK under the UNHCR's international resettlement programme. The refugees arrive in groups of 15-20 families (50-80 people) at a time and the first 285 persons involved in the programme have been successfully resettled in Sheffield and Bolton, and more recently in Bury, Hull and Rochdale. Gateway is a specific programme and is not open to the greater proportion of refugees who have come to the UK under their own steam.

The Sunrise programme is the main feature of the Home Office's refugee integration strategy and is currently being piloted in London, Leeds/Sheffield, Scotland and Manchester. It is the first systematic approach to integration, where the funded organisations offer caseworker support to provide advice and intensive guidance for new refugees, starting with the 28-day transition period from NASS support. In these first stages the caseworker concentrates on helping the refugee meet housing, health and child education needs and ensuring that mainstream benefits and employment advice are accessed. Continuing support is provided for the remainder of the year and a total of 17 hours per year is allocated per individual or refugee family.

If the pilots are successful, Sunrise is likely to form the core of a standard package of integration services available to refugees, which is currently under development with the view to implementing it nationwide by 2008. Experience from the pilot studies has shown that housing is the area of support that refugees first need assistance with and much of the first 28 days' support is focussed on ensuring that the refugees have somewhere to live.

The choice-based lettings (CBL) allocation process is a positive step forward, enabling greater choice and moving away from an inflexible centrally-driven allocations policy. It has, however, had comparatively little impact to date on helping refugees meet their housing needs. This is due to a lack of awareness amongst individuals and community groups, which may result in poor access or high expectations that cannot be met, and the fact that many CBL systems take the date of registration as the date of positive decision rather than backdating it to arrival in the area. It does, however, have the potential to bring benefits of improved community cohesion in an area.

One of the main problems in preventing more rapid and successful integration of refugees is the government policy of delaying any attempt at integration until the day the individual receives a positive decision to stay, at which point integration is positively encouraged. There are reasons for this policy, including the need to prevent raising the false expectations of asylum seekers. Some steps are taken towards fostering integration such as fast-tracking the National Insurance Number (NINO) process and language tuition. As asylum decision times are reduced, successful refugees should have a much shorter wait before the integration process begins.

Clearly, the earlier the integration process can start after people arrive in the country the more successful it will be and service providers should ensure that the most appropriate systems are in place to use as soon as is legally permissible.

The Home Office and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) have been encouraging local authorities to enter into agreements with the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND, formerly NASS) accommodation providers to convert the former NASS tenancy into a settled home, avoiding the risk of homelessness or the need for movement to alternative accommodation. Where this is not possible or desirable, authorities are being encouraged to meet the costs of a delayed eviction from the IND accommodation, until an alternative settled home can be found. Two regional pilots are in place in the West Midlands and North West regions of the UK to test the viability of a scheme of this nature.

# Recognising refugees as assets

The good intention of successive governments in providing much needed support for those who have been granted refugee status has resulted over the years in the establishment of a needs-based approach. It is now increasingly recognised that this can lead to disempowerment of refugees and a longer period of dependence on the state than is necessary.

However, refugees arrive in the UK with capabilities as well as needs and many are highly entrepreneurial. Most refugees are concerned to become independent of any state support as soon as possible, either by finding employment or setting up their own businesses, and to be a benefit to the society that has welcomed them. The capabilities and potential of refugees to improve not only their own situation but also that of others, as well as contributing to their host community, are increasingly acknowledged, although there has been comparatively little take-up of the opportunity that this presents. For example, many studies have shown that more than 80 per cent of refugees rely on family, friends and refugee community organisations to find homes or obtain advice and yet current procedures do not always recognise and support this. There still needs to be more of a change to the language and mental frameworks for thinking about refugees and recognising that an asset-based view and approach has greater potential to bring benefit not only to the refugee but also to the host community.

There is an increasing number of self-help initiatives as refugees attempt to improve their housing situation. There are many fledgling refugee community housing associations that are currently providing direct housing services for their communities (at least four are fully registered with the Housing Corporation and more than ten are unregistered). Refugees have also established social enterprise businesses which are increasingly competing to provide contracted housing management services, such as the Aston Brook Housing Association which is run by Somali social entrepreneurs and the Refugee Care Association in Sheffield.

Focussing on the assets of refugee communities does not imply that they do not need additional resources or support from outside; they do. Rather, it means that outside resources will be much more effectively used if the refugee community itself is fully mobilised, as external funds can then be used most effectively to create the greatest impact.

However, creating an asset base is not sufficient in itself to meet the huge challenges faced by some refugee communities and government will continue to have a significant role to play. It is important that both needs-based and asset-based approaches should be used, since the responsibility of improving their situation should not lie entirely with the refugees themselves, but neither should their skills and abilities be marginalised.



### What do we mean by assets?

Assets are the range of resources that allow refugees and their host communities to make their own choices about the future. The knowledge, skills, resources, values and commitment of the refugees and organisations and individuals in the host community lie at the heart of the process and these need to be identified.

Like any other group of individuals, refugees are not a homogeneous group, coming from a wide range of backgrounds with many different talents and qualities.

Not all refugees identify themselves with a specific community and for those that do, it may not necessarily be neighbourhood-based, but may instead be based on shared interests, faith or ethnic groupings.

When looking at the assets of any community it can be seen that these fall into five main categories<sup>12</sup>:

- Community residents
- Local groups or organisations who come together to pursue common goals
- Local institutions (schools, hospitals, libraries, local government)
- Physical assets (buildings, land, tools)
- Local economy (formal, informal and illegal businesses)

12. Agents Rather than Patients: Realising the potential for asset-based community development, BSHF, 2003



As local organisations who come together to pursue common goals, refugee community organisations (RCOs) have long played an important role within their own communities and their value to the wider community is now beginning to be recognised. RCOs are organisations run by and for refugees. They provide advice and support, often informally, and act as bridges to mainstream services and other local groups. Only a minority offer more specialist services and generally these are the larger, better-funded RCOs, which have built up experience over a number of years. Increasingly they are also taking on advocacy roles and protecting basic rights<sup>13</sup>. RCOs have the advantage of knowing where their community members live, speaking the language, understanding the problems faced by community members and having the trust of community members who are often fearful of authorities. They are able to form links with other community residents and help refugees to begin to play a role in the development of their local communities. The support of specialist refugee agencies, such as Refugee Action, is especially important for the many smaller and recently established associations.

### **Building up capacity and empowering communities**

With increasingly complex systems around asylum and immigration, it is important to help build the skills and capacity of many small RCOs if they are to develop to their greatest potential. Some of the barriers experienced by these self-help grassroots organisations are the lack of acknowledgement from statutory and other providers and the lack of funding and other resources for activities.

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Building the capacity of the organisation and improving its governance are therefore crucial in developing the assets of small RCOs and enabling them to take on greater responsibility.

New communities can also learn from the experiences of settled BME communities. The creation of umbrella bodies in each region or local authority area would make it easier for local public service providers to engage with RCOs.

The **Housing Association Charitable Trust** (hact)<sup>14</sup> has long been working to develop the skills of refugee-run organisations and to enable them to provide the much more complex housing support and advice that is needed for their community members.

A range of activities and programmes have been carried out, including the provision of training and support on a regional basis to help reduce the sense of isolation for small RCOs. Grants have been made available to take on an advice worker and consultancy support has been given to help the organisations develop and improve their governance and long-term sustainability.

13. Refugee Community Organisations and Dispersal: Networks, resources and social capital. D. Griffiths, N. Sigona and R. Zetter, the Policy Press, 2005

14. Hact is not-for-profit organisation that is dedicated to solving housing problems by influencing policy and practice. It focuses on groups on the margins of mainstream housing provision and has two main themes: helping households to live independently and sustainable communities.

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One such RCO that has been able to improve its capacity and expand its activity is the **Centre for African Families Positive Health**. This was started by a group of HIV/AIDS-affected people who recognised that there was no appropriate support being provided for the increasing numbers of men, women and children affected by HIV/AIDS in African communities in Bedfordshire. They established a centre to provide peer support and advice that is culturally sensitive, respectful and empathetic for Africans affected by HIV/AIDS, African being defined by origin, descent and/or association.

The areas where advice is typically needed cover a range of HIV/AIDS-related issues, as well as on welfare benefits, housing, immigration rules and access to education. The benefits achieved through the work of the centre include the following:

- Reducing isolation and fear.
- Providing education about HIV/AIDS and encouraging early testing.
- Encouraging people to attend hospital appointments and to follow their medical treatments.

- Helping to remove the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS.
- Providing emotional support to help fight denial.
- Helping to relieve stress and suffering.
- Increasing uptake of statutory provided services.
- Reducing social exclusion.
- Providing respite for sufferers and their families, especially children who often act as carers.

In short, this support service saves lives. It enhances self-esteem and life skills and provides health education to people who would not feel easily able to use the mainstream provision. The organisation is peer led and all efforts are made to involve people living with HIV/AIDS in the development and improvement of its services, which extend to the whole family and not just the person living with HIV/AIDS. It also provides a social network through the social events that it organises, as well as an outreach service. It strongly encourages and provides volunteering opportunities.

The development of the organisation and improvement in its capacity and governance mean that it is now looking to expand its activities and provide further support to help its members improve their housing situation.

Not every refugee community has necessarily reached the stage where it has established an RCO but additional ways of helping them to start or develop their capacity include the following:

- Using existing government programmes to support vulnerable people and to build capacity within communities, such as the ChangeUp and Together We Can programmes to support the integration of refugees. A recent change to the ChangeUp initiative provides a targeted programme to meet capacity building of specific and more marginalised groups including those working with refugees<sup>15</sup>.
- Helping RCOs to work with the wider voluntary sector to learn how to bid for grants and apply for the various funding sources that are available.
- Encouraging all existing communities to welcome new communities and choosing to work with those leaders and organisations that have kept an outward looking focus.
- Encouraging greater coordination between the many and varied organisations that are currently involved in the process of encouraging integration.
- Encouraging social housing providers to support and form partnerships with RCOs that work with communities living in the areas in which they operate.
- Ensuring that refugees and their organisations get expert support and help in establishing and developing themselves.

Although coverage is not comprehensive, all of these activities are carried out in various places in the UK and should be recognised and replicated as examples of domestic good practice.

The **Derby Bosnia-Herzegovina Community Association** (DBHCA) demonstrates how an RCO can provide substantial support for both its own members and the local community over a period of years. DBHCA was established in 1995 by members of the Bosnian Muslim refugee community in Derby. Its objective was to provide support for all refugees from former Yugoslavia fleeing the Balkans conflict of the 1990s regardless of ethnic origin and background. It has more recently expanded its services to all refugees and vulnerable households within Derby and the East Midlands, enabling them to obtain advice on issues relating to asylum and settlement.

The Balkan conflict drove hundreds of thousands of people from their homes and many of those who sought refuge in the UK were medical evacuees or ex-detainees that were extremely vulnerable. Mr Ferid Kevric was one of the first Bosnian refugees to arrive in the UK in 1992. Realising that many fellow refugees felt lost and vulnerable, he helped to set up DBHCA as a focal point for the new community. It relies upon volunteers from within the community to provide a wide range of advice and support services. The ability to access safe, secure housing was recognised as fundamental to successful settlement and integration.

DBHCA helps people explore various housing options and explains their rights in relation to housing and welfare benefits. In cases where language is a problem, DBHCA acts as an advocate.

15. In August 2006, Capacitybuilders, a new national agency with responsibility initially to manage the ChangeUp programme, announced details of their new Improving Reach programme, which seeks to improve access to capacity building and support for a range of frontline groups/organisations that may not have been reached in previous ChangeUp programmes, including refugee groups.

It also provides interpreting and translation services, as well as running English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, which encourage independence and support successful settlement.

Helping refugees to obtain settled housing provides the basis from which they can access training, education and employment. DBHCA has gradually expanded its activities to provide additional assistance in signposting individuals to education, employment advice and training and it is very proud of the fact that many of its members are now in full-time employment and that 50 of its young people have now graduated from British universities.

Many members have purchased their own homes; however, it has recently become increasingly difficult to do so with the escalation in house prices in Derby, a problem shared with many others in the city. Mental health problems such as depression are common amongst refugees and DBHCA offers access to counselling or self-help groups and directs members of the community towards healthcare providers in order to help them address these issues.

DBHCA encourages inter-community understanding through a range of activities that celebrate Bosnian culture, including a dance troupe that performs at various events in the region, basketball and football teams that play in local leagues and classes for children that help to keep the Bosnian language alive within the community. Creating links with the wider community encourages understanding between different groups and offers opportunities for networking and informal exchange of experience.



Working in partnership is seen as crucial to future development and DBHCA works with other RCOs in order to share good practice and avoid duplication of services. Engaging with networks such as the Derby Refugee Forum enables partners to learn from each other and creates a coordinated and consistent approach to funding bids, which can be written specifically to demonstrate wider community benefit. In order to ensure that the views of the Bosnian community are acknowledged during the development of local policies and to promote understanding of cultural differences, DBHCA attends various local and regional groups such as the Derbyshire Constabulary Ethnic Community Advisory Forum and the Derby City Council Ethnic Minority Advisory Forum and has links to a wide range of other organisations.

By adopting a professional approach to its management and governance and being proactive in bidding for funding, DBHCA has identified new partnership opportunities and manages its assets in a sustainable way in order to generate an income that funds services and allows it to employ members of staff. It provides a valuable example of how RCOs can effectively build their capacity in order to deliver a wide range of services and create strong partnerships with the wider community, which foster understanding, celebrate diversity and support integration.

There are similarly successful cases in other parts of the country. For example, Windows for Sudan and the Midlands Albanian Community Foundation, both in Birmingham, have been able to deliver a range of services based on the principle of partnership.

### **Lessons from Utica, USA: ‘the town that loves refugees’**

Similar issues of refugee integration are found around the world. In the United States, for example, the basis for refugee dispersal is the availability of employment, training and support opportunities as well as housing and there are valuable lessons in how some communities have welcomed and absorbed refugees into their midst.

Utica is a small community of 60,000 people in upstate New York, which was experiencing serious decline in both population and economic strength as a result of the relocation of many manufacturing companies and closure of a local military base. The population was ageing and young people were leaving the area to find better employment opportunities. The town, however, has successfully resettled 11,000 refugees from 31 different countries over the last 25 years and is now beginning to see a reversal of this decline. The Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees (MVRRCR) has been at the centre of this success working to ensure that refugees are welcomed into the community.

The main activities of the centre are:

- Teaching refugees practical life skills that enhance their ability to integrate into the community. These include securing housing, socialisation and acculturation classes, language instruction, job placement, professional interpretation and translation and immigration and citizenship assistance.
- Building individual and community capacity to integrate newcomers into the local Utica community.

- Fostering an atmosphere of understanding and tolerance through the engagement of individual clients, the refugee/immigrant community and the local community.

Refugees have brought many positive benefits to the town, which was previously experiencing steep population decline. These include:

- Purchasing an estimated 600 homes, of which nearly half were owned by the city due to people defaulting on paying their taxes.
- Opening new businesses including furniture and grocery stores, restaurants, and insurance brokers.
- Bringing additional purchasing power to the local community, including spending millions of dollars locally revitalising their homes.
- Giving a positive example of a work ethic that many have lost in the US. Within the top ten per cent of high-school graduates, many are from refugee families.
- Increasing the attractiveness of the city to employers.
- Bringing diversity to the local community, which is predominantly Irish, Polish and Italian.
- Maintaining the city population above 50,000, which gives access to a range of federal grants.

Some comparatively minor problems have been experienced. These include the fact that the large number of languages spoken leads to the impossibility of providing a comprehensive translation service in schools and hospitals.

There are also conflicts among youngsters in the school communities, especially at times between Puerto Rican and Bosnian youth.

With the purchase of so many homes by refugees and the revitalisation of neighbourhoods, property values are rising as is the cost of rent and other goods and services. However, salaries have remained stagnant, putting increasing pressure on the working poor.

Overall, however, it is estimated that there has been a huge positive impact on the community. Studies have shown that within 14 years the cost to the community of resettling refugees has been reversed into a positive economic impact.

While the refugees were once perceived as replacement value to a declining community, the changing economic conditions are creating new pressures, with some beginning to see refugees as competition for limited and increasingly expensive resources.

Utica has been fortunate in having certain factors that have made the process of integration easier. These include the following:



- The city's community service infrastructure was originally designed to serve a larger population and has been able to easily absorb the refugee numbers.
- As a textile manufacturing community, the skills of those arriving can be easily absorbed into the working environment. Difficulties are now emerging as the industry gradually becomes more service-based and language ability becomes increasingly important.
- There is no pressure on jobs for existing residents, as the economic position of the city has improved.
- With the city's history of being an immigrant community, there was a more passive acceptance of the refugees moving in than might have been in other communities.
- The two largest refugee groups, the Bosnians and Russians, being East European, are not easily distinguishable from the local community, although recent arrivals from Somalia, Liberia and Myanmar are more so.
- The local press and employers have always been very positive and supportive of the work of MVRCC.

Since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre of 11th September 2001, anti-immigrant sentiment is growing in the town and a greater resistance to migrants is beginning to take root in the community, inflamed by the myths that circulate, particularly around the level of financial support refugees receive. There was concern that the pressure in the city was beginning to increase and action was taken to address this by engaging the local community more actively in the resettlement process to help break down myths and barriers and facilitate greater understanding in the community.

Some of the methods used include:

- Raising the profile of the MVRRCR and the work it is doing in building bridges and actively engaging in the acculturation process on both sides.
- Funding local community volunteers to work in the centre and help build rapport between individual refugee and community members.
- Encouraging faith groups to establish links with each new arrival, meeting them at the airport, taking them to their apartments and building a relationship with them.
- Running education programmes in local schools, teaching young people about the new cultures that are coming into their communities and how to engage with them.
- Collaborating with other organisations including service providers, employers and local government to develop their abilities in working with people from different cultural backgrounds.
- Holding quarterly meetings with employers, landlords and health care providers to identify issues, challenges and problems and to be proactive in bringing attention to these.



# Housing for refugees in cohesive communities

## What is integration?

Integration is the process that takes place when refugees are empowered to achieve their full potential as members of British society, to contribute to the community and to become fully able to exercise the rights and responsibilities that they share with other residents<sup>16</sup>. More simply, it is the feeling that you belong to your local neighbourhood.

The Economic Council on Refugees and Exiles identifies integration of refugees as a dynamic two-way process, which begins from day one when a refugee arrives within the new host society. It is not a course that can be completed or a test that can be passed, but is much more a continuous process enabling refugees and their communities to live in harmony within the host population of which they form a part. Integration places demands both on receiving societies and on the individuals and communities concerned. It is a long-term process that extends beyond the first generation of refugees and consideration needs to be given to the inter-generational aspect of integration. Integration relates both to the conditions for and actual participation in all aspects of the economic, social, cultural, civil and political life of the country of the host society as well as to refugees' own perceptions of acceptance by and membership in that society<sup>17</sup>.

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The British Government's integration strategy set out in the document 'Integration Matters'<sup>18</sup> seeks to empower refugees in three key areas: achieving their full potential, accessing services – including housing – and contributing to the community. It is recognised that housing is central to the integration process, as it is only possible to feel part of a community if you feel safe, secure and settled in your own home.

Increased community cohesion is the outcome of improved integration and it fits within broader government objectives of increasing the role of civil society and active citizenship. Unlike 30 years ago, local communities are often multi-ethnic with large numbers of different ethnic groups represented. Integration today can be as much about encouraging interaction between people of Sudanese and Pakistani roots, for example, as it is between non-UK nationals and those of British origin.

16. Integration Matters: A national strategy for refugee integration, Home Office, 2005

17. The Way Forward: Europe's role in the global refugee protection system, European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), July 2005

18. Integration Matters – op cit.

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The National Refugee Integration Forum (NRIF) was established to advise the government on the development of the National Refugee Strategy for England and to monitor its implementation. It does this through its plenary sessions and work of its standing sub-groups, including its Housing and Community Safety sub-group.

Although there is some excellent integration practice, it is very patchy and inconsistent and depends largely on where the refugees live. Much of the local welcome is informally driven by individual champions and faith-based or community groups. Very few housing providers are involved in any strategic way in this kind of community cohesion and good neighbourly work, although the National Housing Federation encourages RSLs to think more positively about neighbourhoods and communities they work in through its iNbusiness for Neighbourhoods programme. Involving RCOs is essential in this process, as only they can bring the community links and knowledge.

The government's Sunrise programme seeks to provide a much more co-ordinated move-on process to achieve better integration. It recognises the need to work much more closely with RCOs if the dispersal regime is to be effective and to assist refugees in setting in their dispersal areas once they have received a positive decision. It involves the mainstreaming of services for refugees, including an intensive 28-day sign-posting/support package, in a way that empowers refugees.

Integration is a complex process, which the government intends to measure against the following indicators:

- Employment
- English language attainment
- Volunteering
- Contact with community organisations
- Take-up of British citizenship
- Housing standards
- Reporting of racial, cultural or religious harassment
- Access to education

There are three key areas in which achievement can be identified: respect, equality of opportunity and safety. These issues may be problems for the local host community as well as refugees and it is important to understand if this is the case. It is recognised that work on these three key areas needs to be carried out across government and other involved agencies to link them into other mainstream policy and practice such as the government's Respect and Safer Neighbourhoods agendas. One of the mechanisms through which this can be done is by ensuring that refugee concerns are included within Local Area Agreements (LAAs), which are the current mechanism for combined government funding at the local level and which allow local stakeholders to decide key targets on which to deliver. Safer Neighbourhoods is a key theme in LAAs and incorporating consideration for the special needs of refugees in here would be particularly valuable.

## Improving integration and cohesion

Community tensions are not an inevitable consequence of new migration. The actual impact will vary according to a range of factors, including the socio-economic structure of the neighbourhood, its history of previous settlement, the local media portrayal and the success of local agencies in mediating between established and incoming populations. Possible ways of increasing community cohesion include the following:

- 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 they are getting a better deal than local people.
- Undertaking local regeneration projects involving refugees and members of the host community, since having a shared goal is a particularly effective framework for breaking down barriers.
- Providing good housing, training and other services aimed at the needs of refugees helps them to settle in their dispersal areas.
- Involving local decision makers and media in a positive manner.
- Being honest with the host community as to the opportunities and possible problems.
- Providing opportunities for the interaction of refugee and host communities, such as shared experience through sport or arts.
- Providing positive choices for refugees as to where they live.

All local authorities have a specific duty to provide equality of opportunity and to help create cohesive communities and the Audit Commission is now asking for evidence that they are doing so.

It is less clear as to exactly how the process of beginning cross-cultural contact and reducing intolerance will be carried out. The example of the work of the **Birmingham New Communities Network (BNCN)** provided below shows how, in one city, significant steps have been made towards creating such contacts and fostering integration with the host community.

Established in 2004, BNCN acts as an umbrella organisation for over 100 migrant and refugee communities in Birmingham. The city has a long history of migration and this, together with its size and location, make it a popular destination for refugees, many of whom have brought their skills and trades, adding to the city's wealth and prosperity over the years.

Communities in the city fall into three broad groupings; the indigenous or host community, the older established migrant communities, such as those from Ireland, Pakistan, the West Caribbean and those fleeing Nazi persecution in Germany and the newly arrived communities. The vast majority of those arriving in recent decades are refugees fleeing conflicts, wars and political suppression.

Some of the refugee organisations in Birmingham came into existence more than 20 years ago, but the vast majority are more recently established in response to the need of their communities to preserve their cultural heritage and to provide support and basic services to their members.

As an umbrella organisation, BNCN seeks to:

- Represent the interests of new communities in the Birmingham area and to take action on common issues.
- Build strong relationships both between new communities and with the wider community and the governing bodies of the city.
- Provide an opportunity for smaller groups who do not have their own RCO, or for those who do not easily fit within their refugee community group, to have a voice.

It recognises that there is a strong relationship between refugee integration in the city and housing provision and that social exclusion results from the lack of suitable accommodation, as well as low levels of employment, education and health and safety. New communities are typically concentrated in deprived inner-city areas, which are characterised by overcrowding, poor services, high crime rates and few leisure facilities. However, they are also multi-cultural in nature and provide a more supportive and affordable environment for newly arriving refugees.

The work carried out to date by BNCN includes organisational development activities, initiatives to promote cohesion and integration and capacity building. As a result of these activities, many of BNCN's members have become actively involved in public life and participate effectively in policy and strategic consultations, conferences and workshops.

Methods used by BNCN to encourage community cohesion and integration include:

- Creating a football programme with 15 different football teams from a variety of communities across Birmingham.
- Developing a Diversity Youth Forum to bring together young people from the various communities to address issues of concern and to organise activities for young people.
- Establishing a women's club (initiated by the Palestinian community organisation) to share understanding of their cultures (food, wedding rituals etc.) and enjoy each other's company on a regular basis.
- Encouraging participation in public life by standing for positions such as school governors or by being registered to vote.
- Asking people from all groups to set their priorities for action and to develop plans to work towards achieving them. There are clear areas of concern, typically education, employment, housing, mental health and well-being.
- Implementing a research training project to equip community researchers to work on the above issues.



The barriers that BNCN has faced in its work include:

- Reliance on the voluntary labour of the community leaders who are also engaged in other personal and communal activities.
- Varied perceptions of the need for collective work by the diverse cultural backgrounds represented.
- Limitations as to what can be achieved and the speed at which it can be done due to lack of funding.
- Lack of coordination and/or competition for scarce resources.

There are a variety of initiatives designed to foster improved levels of integration and inclusion.

Hact's Communities R Us project is establishing three local pilot projects which seek to bring together residents and newer refugee groups in vibrant and co-operative local communities.

Seed funding and community development support is being provided to support these groups to tackle shared neighbourhood concerns, such as a lack of play space for children. The experiences will be brought together in a community toolkit designed to demonstrate how to combat negative stereotypes of refugees and enable them to settle and contribute as neighbours.

### Bringing refugee housing into the mainstream

The immediate issues relating to housing for refugees are preventing homelessness, improving access to housing, helping refugees sustain tenancies and improving community safety. If these needs are to be met, it is important to ensure that refugees have equal access to all services, either through mainstream housing providers or, if applicable, in the specialist BME housing sector. Of key importance is the need to involve refugees in the development of mainstream services.

For housing of refugees to be considered as part of mainstream housing provision, it must be integrated into housing policy and delivery at local, regional and national levels. In particular, it needs to 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. It is important that government departments are able to talk to each other and work together and since there are clearly barriers to this happening at present, steps need to be urgently taken to understand and remove these.

The Refugee Housing Integration Programme run by hact comprises a range of different initiatives including the Accommodate refugee housing partnership project and the Communities R Us project described earlier. It seeks to help integrate refugees and increase the amount and quality of housing for refugees by:

- Integrating the housing needs and aspirations of refugee communities into mainstream housing policy and practice.

- Increasing the capacity of refugee communities to participate in the development of housing services appropriate to their needs.
- Developing sustainable partnership working between emerging refugee communities and mainstream housing and related service providers.

It is important to understand how we should move from a needs-based approach to an asset-based approach to address these issues and also what political leadership is necessary to take that forward. The desired outcomes of the process should be:

- Informed choice
- Minimum quality standards for housing
- Community safety issues addressed
- Refugees' skills and resources brought into decision-making
- Identification of the community's capacity to create solutions
- More collaboration and partnership working

The Housing Corporation has a major role to play in most aspects of housing provision and should seek to work with associations to encourage and facilitate the sharing of good practice. It also can help to identify the current barriers to better housing provision for refugees and work with social housing providers to see how these might be overcome and encourage provision.

By ensuring that mainstream funding sources at local, regional and national level are accessible to meet the needs and aspirations of refugees

communities, the provision of housing and support for refugees can more easily become part of mainstream government policy and practice. For example, by ensuring that regional housing boards include refugee housing in all regional investment strategies or by including housing-related support for refugees within the Supporting People funding stream, provision becomes a part of accepted practice rather than a special case.

It is important that meeting the housing needs of refugees is included in the targets that local authorities and housing associations are being asked to achieve. This will generate a major incentive for local authorities to meet the refugee housing targets in order to achieve their funding compliance and earn sufficient points for greater autonomy of action in the future. A key way forward is through LAAs and the use of comprehensive performance assessment indicators with guidance from housing strategies and regional housing boards. Equally important is the need to identify the incentives and levers to encourage good practice.

Shared aspirations and concerns at a local level can motivate people to work together and hact's Communities R Us project is looking to develop a community toolkit to share with others and to understand the process, which is about building bridges and creating good neighbours at the local level. The establishment and support of local networks, which has often been a key role of agencies such as Refugee Action, can be a crucial part of this, enabling new ideas to be tested, new initiatives to be developed and existing providers to be challenged.

A wide range of statutory and voluntary agencies are involved with the integration process.

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**... 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 ...**

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Further education colleges are sorting out language problems, job centres are giving people national insurance numbers and access to proper benefits and providing training, mentors and case workers are providing individual long-term consistent support. There is also an astonishing number of voluntary and community-based organisations working locally. There is a fine line between being rigid and prescriptive, killing off the blossoming of all this voluntary activity and having a more coordinated approach that eliminates the duplication of activity and provides a more even coverage of support provision.

### **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. This is separate from the individual support provided through mentoring programmes. It is important to understand how individuals, organisations, and local authorities can take leadership roles in promoting partnership between RSLs, local authorities and RCOs. Training is crucial to ensure that people know what the issues are and how best to engage with the local media.



The fact-led Accommodate initiative, aims to improve refugee access to housing by supporting local partnerships made up of RCOs, housing providers, local authorities and other agencies. The lessons 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 provided by **Bolton Community Homes**, which also leads one of hact's five Accommodate partnerships. Situated to the northwest of Greater Manchester, the Metropolitan Borough of Bolton has a population of 270,000, of which 11 per cent come from BME groups.

The inclusion of Bolton in the NASS dispersal scheme has further increased the diversity of the population with approximately 400 asylum seekers receiving positive decisions and remaining in the borough each year.

Bolton'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.



Bolton Community Homes (BCH) was established in 2002 and uses a partnership approach to deliver Bolton's housing and refugee integration strategies. BCH partners include registered social landlords, private sector landlords, community organisations, private sector developers and 'Bolton at Home', an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO), which was created to manage and improve Bolton's 20,000 council properties. BCH has a legal agreement to deliver strategic housing services on behalf of the local authority and employs a joined-up approach to achieve consistency in the provision of housing advice and in the delivery and management of social housing.

The advantages of the partnership approach include the following:

- BCH partners all contribute and share resources.
- Common values and a determination to succeed enable BCH partners to focus resources to deliver shared objectives.
- The choice-based lettings scheme provides borough-wide access to social housing stock, irrespective of the provider, and includes the contribution of properties from accredited private sector landlords.
- Sharing risk between partners enables BCH to create innovative solutions, with the understanding that there is collective responsibility for any problems that may arise.

The advantages of the partnership approach have been particularly evident in the shaping of housing provision and services for new communities in Bolton. BCH appreciates that successful refugee settlement has a positive impact on the wider community and works closely with the Bolton Refugee Forum to address key concerns around integration. BCH has employed innovative approaches to community consultation with activities such as drama, art, and music workshops used to gather local views and to inform policy development. BCH is currently working with hact through the Accommodate programme, to develop a refugee community housing initiative for its growing Somali population, as well as being an enthusiastic and successful pioneer of the Gateway Protection programme, which supports the most vulnerable refugees.

Other innovations include Bolton's Urban Care Centres, which help new communities to access mainstream services such as housing, healthcare, employment training and social services. The centres encourage independence through training courses such as ESOL classes, life skills, budgeting and debt management. Employment is a crucial factor in settlement and BCH has developed traineeships for members of new communities, providing access to employment with skills such as plumbing, driving, woodwork and electrical maintenance. Refugees are actively encouraged to gain skills, which could increase employment opportunities. Bolton has the lowest level of reported attacks on asylum seekers in the north of England and this is attributed to effective collaboration, with RCOs, voluntary sector organisations and community representatives working together to increase understanding of new communities and promote the benefits of integration.

## Information and awareness raising

There are four key issues concerned with information relating to refugees that need to be urgently addressed:

- Research and mapping to address the lack of basic factual information as to where refugees are living, moving, settling.
- The misinformation created by the distorted media image around a range of immigration issues.
- The nature, quality and consistency of information provided to refugees themselves.
- The role of RCOs in providing information.

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<sup>19</sup>. There is scarcely any consistent quantitative information on the number of refugees living in any one place, their patterns of movement or any details on their skills, training or qualifications. There is no understanding of the more qualitative issues around their living conditions, their interaction with other refugee groups or their host communities. There is also no clear information on other marginalised groups, such as failed asylum seekers or illegal immigrants, who live and work alongside refugee communities as well as elsewhere in the UK.

The lack of data on settlement is also a critical issue. The systems of data collection and census categories for ethnic monitoring do not identify people as refugees. Choice-based lettings, for example, don't necessarily record that people have been refugees. Whilst it could be done, this is potentially controversial and further debate would be needed, including with refugees themselves. For housing, planning and provision purposes it is important to identify ways that settlement patterns can be predicted, as well as ways in which specific performance targets could be integrated to regulation and inspection regimes to create incentives for good practice. Further research is needed but first it is important to bring together all existing knowledge. Spot research is important as well as the longitudinal studies, which help understanding of the changing situations of refugees as they settle and integrate into our communities. Both quantitative and qualitative data are needed. Possible sources of data include:

- The housing register and homeless routes under Parts 6 and 7 of the Housing Act 1996 can provide data.
- The choice-based lettings system for people accessing the social housing system may eventually provide enough data to establish a pattern.
- Inclusion of a national marker in the census data about immigration history would provide valuable longitudinal data, although not without political controversy.
- Information from the Sunrise programme may also prove to be valuable.

19. Experiences of New Immigration: Reflections from the evidence base., D. Robinson and K. Reeve, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006.

Although research is currently being carried out, a lot of it may be too fine-grained or slow at producing results to be of immediate use. What is needed is information with perhaps less detail but produced more quickly, since people are highly mobile, especially in London. Often simple information on net movement is all that is needed. Even snapshots are valuable in giving understanding about movement of refugees: whether people are staying in their dispersal areas or moving away to other areas. It is important to understand the flows and why people are moving.

Several organisations are in the process of monitoring these flows for their own information and producing a range of both qualitative and quantitative data. The national housing charity Shelter is producing its own community-profiling toolkit containing both hard and soft data to enable it to align its services more accurately. In all localities, speaking to refugee communities and their organisations will provide essential information about trends, demography, needs, capacity and aspirations that may indicate the need for more and better information. The Birmingham New Communities Network is facing the same problem in Birmingham and is currently training 20 community researchers to collect information relevant to the situation there. On a global scale, UNHCR has experience of mapping the situation in various countries around the world.

Although local authorities may have some of the data required they are often not willing or able to interrogate their information systems to produce it. Time pressures are one major reason for this. However, mainstream funding from Supporting People, for example, needs evidence of current and future need/demand to enable the appropriate services to be provided and supported.

Many different local initiatives are taking place and it is important that these are evaluated as soon as possible, in order to build up guidance on what works.

A well thought-out media strategy is needed to counteract the misreporting of issues around migration, asylum and refugees. Highlighting of positive case studies in the housing press will help to encourage RSLs to play a more positive role. There needs to be a much greater understanding of the economic advantages brought by refugees to the local community and the business case for the community as a whole. It also helps to emphasise/communicate the more positive stories and create an awareness of the potential opportunities that refugees can bring. Local authority staff, police, GPs and teachers, as well as faith and other community leaders were identified as being best placed to promote understanding due to the position of trust and respect in the community. Personalised information on refugees and/or projects which bring local people and refugees together as neighbours work best<sup>20</sup>.

There also needs to be information provided for refugees and their advisers on a consistent basis. Welcome packs need to be provided and these should include specified local information about housing and other options available locally, but also include ways in which refugees can access the information for other areas to which they may want to move. As the Sunrise programme is rolled out nationally, this could enable the collation of a national refugee information database, accessible to all, which would form the backbone of any commitment to enable refugees to have informed choices. Working with refugee-led organisations may also ensure that this gets put out by word of mouth and so reaches many more people.

We need to be aware that many refugees do not read the information provided – people want immediate action and word of mouth is the most common method by which they source information. RCOs have an important role to play in ensuring that accurate information is distributed by word of mouth. If however they are not skilled up and integrated into strategies for providing advice to refugees, this could lead to them inadvertently being a source of misinformation and false expectation.

### **Increasing employment opportunities**

Having the opportunity to earn an income is an essential aspect of ensuring that refugees are able to improve their housing situation, as well as being able to become more settled and involved in their local community<sup>21</sup>. Since 2001, 144,000 refugees have been given permission to work in the UK.

There are a range of difficulties faced by refugees when trying to obtain employment which include the following:

- Problems in using the English language
- Lack of UK qualifications or work experience
- Limited recognition of their national qualifications
- Loss of skills and confidence during the asylum process, as they are not allowed to work or undertake training
- Discrimination by employers

The current government policy of dispersing asylum seekers away from areas of high housing demand means that many of them are resident in deprived areas, some of which also have high rates of unemployment. High rates of unemployment make it difficult to find employment locally and in some dispersal areas refugees face hostility where jobs are scarce. High rates of entrepreneurship are commonly found amongst migrants and refugees and these communities are assets that can be used to help invigorate an area in economic decline.

The reality in Britain is that, wherever you live as a refugee, your qualifications and skills may not immediately be recognised and you may begin work in the low paid end of the service sector, carrying out jobs such as cleaning or working in the transport industry. The arrival of a major influx of migrants from the EU accession states has increased competition for both jobs and English language training, as well as helping to distort and confuse understanding of the refugee's special status.

Once individuals are given a positive refugee decision, they need to make a whole range of far-reaching decisions about where they want to be and what they want to do. There are many disincentives to making sensible decisions at that point, including the lack of advice and information on training prospects. Although there is some excellent advice work taking place, much of it is patchy and there is an urgent need to universalise the good practice that already exists. It is important to address both the stock and flow issues around employment, i.e. meeting the needs of those newly given their refugee status, as well as providing continuing support and assistance for those refugees who have not yet obtained work.

21. Rebuilding Lives - Groundwork: Progress report on refugee employment, National Refugee Integration Forum, 2006



The organisations involved in trying to overcome these problems alongside the government include further education colleges, RCOs and the Learning and Skills Council. Little interest has been shown by employers and although surveys have shown that although employers have often had good experiences when employing refugees, they certainly did not want any publicity, given the current media circus around asylum seekers and refugees. This is particularly regretful given the strong heritage in the UK of companies established by refugees and migrants. More recently, the Confederation of British Industry and the Trades Union Congress have set out a statement of their roles and responsibilities around all migrant workers including refugees<sup>22</sup>. The recent policy change of giving refugees only five years rather than indefinite leave to remain is likely to act as a disincentive to employers investing in the refugee workforce before the five years have elapsed and an indefinite leave to remain has been established.

Improving the whole relationship between refugees and job centres is crucial. Job centres are a very significant part of the machinery of government as they issue national insurance numbers and provide access to benefits, employment and training. In the past refugees have tended to see job centres as instruments of oppression, have reported poor experience, and were generally very nervous of the whole machinery of government operating through them. A successful approach has been recently pioneered in Birmingham where a group of refugees are working as employment advisers actually within a job centre and are already beginning to have an impact on the refugees' perceptions of job centres in that city.

22. Managed Migration: Working for Britain. A joint statement from the Home Office, CBI and TUC, 2005

It is very difficult to assess the scale of the employment issues affecting the refugee population, or measure their integration into the labour market, due to the lack of robust data. Ad hoc surveys show a high level of exclusion from the employment market.

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**... having the opportunity to earn an income is an essential aspect of ensuring that refugees are able to improve their housing situation, as well as being able to become more settled and involved in their local community ...**

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From 2004, JobCentre Plus has included a voluntary marker in their system flagging up the number of refugees who have found jobs after registering. To date information is available on 70,000 of the 144,000 and this shows that 30 per cent have found employment after registering at a job centre. Although the government has developed a strategy of working with a range of voluntary and community organisations to develop more effective partnerships in helping refugees find employment, the strategy does not have any dedicated funding associated with it and much time is still taken in applying for funding from a range of different funding streams. It is also the case that having succeeded in developing an official strategy, a considerable amount of work and enthusiasm is still needed to ensure that it is widely known and understood.

It is estimated that one third of the overall population have the equivalent of professional skills and qualifications – doctors, nurses, teachers, architects and engineers.

There have been recent improvements in the recognition of equivalent qualifications, with real engagement by UK professionals. Job centres have accepted that they have neither the resources nor the expertise to deal with these groups and it is necessary to refer them to others who will be able to work with them to improve their English language or provide retraining, although regretfully there are limited resources to carry out this work.

Possible sources of support here include the Sunrise initiative where caseworkers will also be able to address such issues. Experience to date has shown that most of their time has been spent addressing housing issues, which is the most urgent need as newly accepted refugees come out of the NASS system.

Another possible source of support is the mentoring system which when it was first introduced did not have any sort of employment objective but was rather concerned with developing friendships. Evaluation studies have shown, however, that people have found it very helpful in terms of getting advice and being able to improve their networks in the world of work.

Less successful has been the English language training scheme where large sums of money are being spent (£400 million in 2005/06) and where two recent evaluation studies<sup>23</sup> have shown that it is very difficult to assess the resulting benefit because the impact is not being measured. Language is key in terms of labour market outcomes, as in all areas of refugee integration, and there needs a range of actions to improve both monitoring of effectiveness and reallocation of resources.

23. KPMG Review of English for Speakers of Other Languages. London. DfES/LSC. More than a Language: Interim report of the NIACE Committee of Inquiry on English for speakers of other languages. National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). 2006

# Recommendations for action

The discussions and deliberations of the three-day Consultation were distilled into an Agenda for Action to help ensure that refugees are better housed and live in more welcoming communities. The recommendations include practical methods by which housing providers and public agencies can work together with refugees, local communities, NGOs and the private sector to deliver housing and support to refugee communities that not only improves lives, but also releases potential and helps create cohesive communities.

The key areas for action fall into five broad categories:

- Establishing national, regional and local strategic frameworks to encourage integrated action in support of refugees.
- Incorporating refugee integration within new policy development.
- Identifying assets and building capacity of refugees and refugee community organisations.
- Fostering partnership-working to achieve local action.
- Carrying out research to improve understanding and raise awareness of the assets and needs of refugees.

Where appropriate, recommendations are directed to those with particular interest in implementing the suggested action. In those cases where the recommendation has broad relevance, it is not attributed to any particular organisation.

## **Establishing national, regional and local strategic frameworks for integrated action**

- The Home Office should extend the support models provided through the Gateway Protection and Sunrise programmes to ensure that all refugees have access to mainstream services such as housing, employment, healthcare and education.
- The Housing Corporation and the National Housing Federation (NHF) should work in partnership with social housing providers and refugee community organisations (RCOs) to increase access to good quality settled housing that is appropriate for refugee needs, recognising that this needs to be balanced with an increased supply for the wider population to prevent local tensions.

- The Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and regional government offices should require local authorities to consult with and involve refugees in the design and development of mainstream services, including the provision of housing.
- The Home Office and DCLG should explore incentives to further encourage social housing providers to commit long-term support to refugee integration programmes such as the Gateway Protection and Sunrise programmes.
- The DCLG should encourage local authorities to review housing allocation and lettings systems including Choice Based Lettings (CBL) to ensure that they offer equality of access and address cultural, language and literacy needs of refugees. RCOs should be used where possible to provide accurate information and clearer expectations about CBL within communities.
- The DCLG should require that indicators of refugee integration be included as Best Value Performance Indicators for local authorities and that the Audit Commission considers refugee issues in the current work to update the Key Lines of Enquiry on diversity.
- Local authorities should use the local knowledge of refugees and RCOs in relation to local strategy development and encourage RCOs to develop support services linked to wider strategic objectives.
- Policy-makers should seek to visit refugees and learn directly of their personal experiences and the housing issues they face.

### **Incorporating refugee integration within new policy development**

- The Cabinet Committee on Social Exclusion should encourage HM Treasury to provide funding for refugee integration initiatives as part of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review, recognising that the costs of not addressing community tension far outweigh the cost of long-term investment in community cohesion.
- The DCLG should consider the needs of refugee communities in the forthcoming Local Government White Paper, looking especially at how reform will give refugees equality of access to information, services and decision-making in neighbourhood management.
- The Equalities Review should consider the social exclusion experienced by refugee communities and ensure that measures that support refugee integration feature within the forthcoming consolidation of equality legislation.
- The Commission for Integration and Cohesion should consult with a wide range of RCOs and their host communities to understand fully the type and extent of support, interventions and policies necessary for successful refugee integration.
- The Commission for Equality and Human Rights should establish a department with responsibility for integrating refugees into mainstream equality policy and coordinating the funding of projects that support integration.



- The Department of Health, Department for Education and Skills and DCLG should work together to ensure that the health and education needs of vulnerable and young refugees are addressed, especially those of unaccompanied minors, with greater coherence of funding. Service providers should be encouraged to integrate their policies in order to support the Every Child Matters agenda.

### **Identifying assets and building capacity of refugees and refugee community organisations**

- A wider recognition of the assets of individuals and communities in general, and in particular, should be encouraged in order to understand that refugees have skills and abilities as well as needs. These assets can be utilised in an asset-based approach to improving housing conditions and community cohesion, complementing the existing needs-orientated approach to supporting refugees.
- The Office of the Third Sector and the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit should work with refugee support agencies to build the skills and organisational capacity of RCOs to enable them to provide an improved service to their communities and access mainstream funding programmes such as ChangeUp, the Big Lottery and the Safer, Stronger Communities Fund.
- The Office of the Third Sector should encourage well-established support networks such as the Community Development Foundation, the British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres (bassac) and others to work with RCOs to develop, support and improve the informal role that RCOs are already playing as advisers, advocates and signposters and ensure that this essential role is incorporated into housing strategies.
- The Housing Corporation and NHF should encourage social housing providers to recruit from within refugee communities, in support of the Black and Minority Ethnic Action Plan 2005-2008.
- The DCLG and the Empty Homes Agency should encourage social housing providers to build the capacity of refugee communities and focus their entrepreneurial flair towards recycling empty properties in order to address housing need and bring positive community benefits, using the good practice demonstrated in Utica, USA and by the Canopy Housing Project in Beeston, Leeds.
- The Home Office, DCLG and the Housing Corporation should explore the potential of Community Land Trusts to create community owned assets for refugee communities, which encourage active citizenship and can be used to deliver affordable housing and sustainable revenue streams.

### **Fostering partnership-working to achieve local action**

- The Housing Corporation and DCLG should seek to develop strategies, which encourage partnerships between social housing providers and RCOs.
- Approaches such as Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements should engage the widest possible range of people and organisations involved with refugee integration in order to illustrate common values and share resources to meet crosscutting objectives.
- Local service providers should collaborate to create refugee advice/information packs. These should include details on the availability of housing, training options and the demand for particular skills, mainstream services and support available through local RCOs to enable refugees to make informed decisions about an area.
- Where appropriate, local authorities should include support services for vulnerable refugee households as part of the allocation of homelessness prevention grants and Supporting People funding and aim to identify common objectives within local partnerships that produce opportunities to match fund refugee integration initiatives.
- Local authorities should emulate Bolton's Urban Care Centres by facilitating the clustering of voluntary groups and local services in order to increase accessibility for marginalised groups, avoid duplication, publicise good practice and share resources.
- Housing, health and education service providers should work with local Race Equality Councils and RCOs to ensure they take account of language and literacy barriers. Staff should undergo training to increase awareness of the wide range of issues associated with the settlement of refugees in order to prevent inadvertent discrimination.
- The Together We Can programme should ensure that refugee communities have access to community engagement projects associated with the local authority Civic Pioneer and Active Learning for Active Citizenship programmes.
- The potential role of young people in building bridges between communities should be recognised through school visits, cultural exchanges and mentoring schemes and such opportunities should be facilitated.
- Local authorities should work with refugee agencies to support the development and consolidation of formal and informal networks between refugees and the wider community by providing meeting places and supporting activities such as cross-community exchange visits and open days.
- Refugees and the wider community should be encouraged to work together on environmental improvement and other community development projects such as providing play space for children, which bring benefit to the whole community, as well as through cultural activities such as music, drama, art, sport, video-diaries and cuisine.

### **Carrying out research to improve understanding and raise awareness of the assets and needs of refugees**

- The shortage of research, statistical data and factual evidence as to where and how refugees are living should be addressed in order to better plan and target resources.
- The DTI and the Home Office should jointly commission research into the business case for delivering services to prevent refugees becoming homeless and the value of promoting community cohesion, by identifying the associated economic costs and the benefits.
- The Housing Corporation should commission research into the current barriers preventing social housing providers from taking a greater role in providing housing and support for refugees and how these can be overcome. This could include collection of data from housing applications to establish trends and analysis of the work currently being carried out to provide evidence of what is effective.
- The DCLG, NHF and the Housing Corporation should commission research into how monolithic social housing estates can be made safer places for refugees to settle.
- DCLG and the Home Office should draw upon the body of research available on the employment of refugees and explore the potential of the American system of refugee settlement, which takes a holistic approach by considering access to employment, training and support networks as key criteria, as well as housing availability.
- DCLG should require local authorities to include specific questions on the needs of refugees in Housing Needs Surveys in order to identify trends, inform policy and target resources more effectively.
- DCLG and the Home Office should include questions on attitudes to asylum in the biennial Citizenship Survey in order to understand public perceptions, highlight trends, inform policy and target resources.
- All those with an interest in the successful integration of refugees should collaborate to create a well thought out media strategy to counteract the misreporting of issues around migration, asylum and refugees. Positive case studies should be used to promote the benefits of refugee integration and to broker agreement by political parties not to exploit refugees for political gain.

## Sources of further information

### **Bolton Community Homes**

Community Housing Services  
1 Silverwell Lane  
Bolton  
Lancashire BL1 1QN

Tel +44 (0)7789 031465  
Fax +44 (0)1204 335910

### **Centre for African Families Positive Health**

90 Old Bedford Road  
Luton  
Bedfordshire LU2 7PD

Tel +44 (0)1582 726061 / 63  
Fax +44 (0)1582 726026  
Email [info@cafph.org](mailto:info@cafph.org)  
Web [www.cafph.org](http://www.cafph.org)

### **Centre for Urban and Regional Studies**

J G Smith Building  
University of Birmingham  
Edgbaston  
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West Midlands B15 2TT

Tel +44 (0)121 414 5028  
Fax +44 (0)121 414 3279  
Web [www.curs.bham.ac.uk](http://www.curs.bham.ac.uk)

### **Community Resource and Information Service**

200 Bunbury Road  
Northfield  
Birmingham  
West Midlands B31 2DL

Tel +44 (0)121 476 8705  
Fax +44 (0)121 476 0288  
Email [jamil@communityresource.org.uk](mailto:jamil@communityresource.org.uk)  
Web [www.communityresource.org.uk](http://www.communityresource.org.uk)

### **Derby Bosnia-Herzegovina Community Association**

Bosnia-Herzegovina Community Centre  
1 Uttoxeter New Road  
Derby DE22 3NL

Tel +44 (0)1332 294436  
Fax +44 (0)1332 293772  
Email [bihcommderby@hotmail.com](mailto:bihcommderby@hotmail.com)  
Web [www.bihcommunityderby.co.uk](http://www.bihcommunityderby.co.uk)

### **The Employability Forum**

2 Downstream  
1 London Bridge  
London SE1 9BG

Tel +44 (0)207 785 6270  
Fax +44 (0)207 785 6275  
Email [info@employabilityforum.co.uk](mailto:info@employabilityforum.co.uk)  
Web [www.employabilityforum.co.uk](http://www.employabilityforum.co.uk)

### **The Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (hact)**

Octavia House  
50 Banner Street  
London EC1Y 8ST

Tel +44 (0)207 247 7800  
Fax +44 (0)207 247 2212  
Email [hact@hact.org.uk](mailto:hact@hact.org.uk)  
Web [www.hact.org.uk](http://www.hact.org.uk)

### **Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees**

School of Social Sciences  
City University  
Northampton Square  
London EC1V 0HB

Tel +44 (0)207 040 4596  
Fax +44 (0)207 040 8580  
Email [icar@city.ac.uk](mailto:icar@city.ac.uk)  
Web [www.icar.org.uk](http://www.icar.org.uk)

**Migrant Helpline**

45 Friends Road  
Croydon  
Surrey CR0 1ED

Tel +44 (0)208 774 0002  
Fax +44 (0)208 774 0003  
Web [www.migranthelpline.org.uk](http://www.migranthelpline.org.uk)

**Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees**

309 Genesee Street  
Utica, NY 13501  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Tel +1 315 738 1083 Ext. 112  
Fax +1 315 738 1168  
Web [www.mvrcc.org](http://www.mvrcc.org)

**National Housing Federation**

Lion Court  
25 Procter Street  
London WC1V 6NY

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**National Refugee Integration Forum**

Accommodation and Community Safety Sub-group  
92 Marlow Road  
London E6 3QQ

Tel +44 (0)788 751 1819

**Refugee Action**

Head Office  
The Old Fire Station  
150 Waterloo Road  
London SE1 8SB

Tel +44 (0)207 654 7700  
Fax +44 (0)207 654 7700  
Web [www.refugee-action.org.uk](http://www.refugee-action.org.uk)

**Refugee Council**

Head Office  
240-250 Ferndale Road  
London SW9 8BB

Tel +44 (0)207 346 6700  
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Web [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)

**Refugee Education & Training Advisory Service**

14 Dufferin Street  
London EC1Y 8PD

Tel +44 (0)207 426 5820  
Email [info@education-action.org](mailto:info@education-action.org)

**Refugee Week**

240-250 Ferndale Road  
London SW9 8BB

Tel +44 (0)207 346 6752  
Email [info@refugeeweek.org.uk](mailto:info@refugeeweek.org.uk)  
Web [www.refugeeweek.org.uk](http://www.refugeeweek.org.uk)

**United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**

Strand Bridge House  
138-142 Strand  
London WC2R 1HH

Tel +44 (0)207 759 8090  
Fax +44 (0)207 759 8119  
Email [gbrloea@unhcr.org](mailto:gbrloea@unhcr.org)  
Web [www.unhcr.org.uk](http://www.unhcr.org.uk)

## Other useful resources

### **Asylum in the UK: An IPPR fact file, IPPR, 2005**

A report, which aims to tackle the myths surrounding asylum seekers and refugees by providing data on asylum in the UK. The report is available for download from the IPPR website at [www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=269](http://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=269)

### **Asylum Seekers: Meeting their healthcare needs, British Medical Association, 2002**

A report by the British Medical Association (BMA), which explores the impact of the asylum process on the health of refugees. The report is available for download from the BMA website at [www.bma.org.uk/ap.nsf/content/asylumseekers](http://www.bma.org.uk/ap.nsf/content/asylumseekers)

### **Attitudes towards Asylum Seekers, Refugees and other Immigrants, Finney, N., Peach, E., 2004**

A report commissioned by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) which looks at public attitudes towards asylum, how attitudes are influenced by the media and successful approaches to influence attitudes. The report is available for download from the CRE website at [www.cre.gov.uk/downloads/asylum\\_icar\\_report.pdf](http://www.cre.gov.uk/downloads/asylum_icar_report.pdf)

### **Citizenship Survey 2005, Department for Communities and Local Government, 2005**

The Citizenship Survey is a biennial survey of adults in England and Wales, covering a range of community based issues including views about the local area, racial and religious prejudice and discrimination. The report is available for download from the website of the Department of Communities and Local Government at [www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1501049](http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1501049)

### **Destitution by Design, Greater London Authority, 2004**

A report by the Greater London Authority which examines the impact of Section 55 of the Nationality Immigration and Asylum (NIA) Act 2002. A copy of the report is available from the GLA website at [www.london.gov.uk/mayor/refugees/docs/destitution\\_by\\_design.pdf](http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/refugees/docs/destitution_by_design.pdf)

### **Housing and Support Services for Asylum Seekers and Refugees: A good practice guide, Chartered Institute of Housing, 2005**

A report commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and published by the Chartered Institute of Housing, which brings together policy and practical experience with regard to refugee integration, highlighting good practice, to assist housing organisations across the UK to develop housing and support services. The report is available from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's website at [www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=719](http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=719)

### **Housing and Support Options for Refugees and Asylum Seekers, National Housing Federation, 2004**

A briefing on what housing associations could be, or are doing to meet the needs of asylum seekers and refugees. It covers current housing provision and discusses the key issues affecting the client group, reflects on current provision and provides three good practice examples. [www.housing.org.uk/library/viewfile.asp?fid=2704](http://www.housing.org.uk/library/viewfile.asp?fid=2704)

**Integration Matters: A national strategy for refugee integration, Home Office, 2005**

A report which sets out the government's national refugee integration strategy for England and explains future plans for promoting refugee integration. The report is available for download from the Immigration and Nationality Directorate website at

[www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/6353/6356/10611/refugeefinal240205.pdf](http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/6353/6356/10611/refugeefinal240205.pdf)

**Is it safe here? Refugee women's experiences in the UK, Dumper, H., 2002**

A report by Refugee Action that documents for the first time refugee women's experiences in the UK.

[www.refugee-action.org.uk/information/documents/researchreport.pdf](http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/information/documents/researchreport.pdf)

**Paying Their Way: The fiscal contribution of immigrants in the UK, IPPR, 2005**

A report by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) which explores the impact of immigration on public finances, by estimating the scale of the contributions made by immigrants. The report is available for download from the IPPR website at

[www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=280](http://www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=280)

**Providing a Safe Haven – Housing Asylum Seekers and Refugees, Chartered Institute of Housing, 2003**

A report, which examines the links between accommodation and successful integration. The report is available for download from the CIH website at

[www.cih.org/policy/asylumbriefing.pdf](http://www.cih.org/policy/asylumbriefing.pdf)

**Refugees Welcome Here**

Final report of the Refugees Welcome Here Campaign, which was launched by a coalition of refugee organisations in Greater Manchester as a reaction against the negative portrayal of asylum seekers in the media.

[www.refugee-action.org.uk/information/documents/RefugeesWelcomeHere.pdf](http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/information/documents/RefugeesWelcomeHere.pdf)

**Refugees' Opportunities and Barriers in Employment and Training, Bloch, A., 2002**

A report commissioned by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) which explores the training and employment experiences of refugees. The report is available for download from the DWP website at

[www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrep179.asp](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrep179.asp)

**Renewal.net**

A web-based resource which includes case studies, policy guidance and research into tackling social exclusion. The section on asylum and refugee support is available at

[www.renewal.net/search.asp](http://www.renewal.net/search.asp)

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