



# BUILDING ON DIVERSITY

PROVIDING HOMES FOR REFUGEES AND STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES

## KEY FACTS

- There are 290,000 refugees in the UK, accounting for 0.5 per cent of the UK population.
- In 2005, there were 25,720 asylum applications in the UK. 7,880 (30 per cent) were granted refugee status, either initially or on appeal. A further 10 per cent were given further leave to remain on other grounds
- In 2005, the vast majority of the immigrants to the UK came from the EU accession countries. Those granted refugee status accounted for only five per cent
- 80 per cent of refugees rely on family, friends and Refugee Community Organisations to find homes or obtain housing advice.
- In 2004, only 2,000 new lettings were made to refugees by Registered Social Landlords

**"Integration and cohesion are not states but processes. They need to be worked at, built up and nurtured. We need to ensure that we are encouraging interaction between communities, and enabling people of all backgrounds to participate in wider society and institutions."**

The Rt. Hon. Ruth Kelly M P, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

Launch of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion, August 2006

## CONSULTATION AT ST GEORGE'S HOUSE, WINDSOR CASTLE

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. Having a settled and secure home is the key to rebuilding their lives and becoming part of the local community.

In June 2006 the Building and Social Housing Foundation invited leading experts and practitioners from local communities, national and international NGOs and government agencies to a three-day consultation at St George's House at Windsor Castle. The participants examined the issues surrounding refugee housing and integration and drew up a range of actions that need to be taken forward to enable refugees to be better housed and live in more welcoming and cohesive communities.

A report containing a summary of the discussion and recommendations of the Consultation has been published. The key recommendations for government are summarised here for quick reference.

## WHO IS DEFINED AS A REFUGEE?

A refugee is a person who, having claimed asylum, is recognised as a refugee under Article 1 of the Geneva Convention 1951. This recognition is only given when there is a well-founded fear of persecution for the asylum seeker in their own country.

Common experiences for newly arrived refugees include:

- 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?

Refugees become eligible for settled housing and support benefits once they have received a positive decision on their asylum application. At this point they have only 28 days to leave the government provided accommodation and find alternative accommodation in the public, private or voluntary sector and claim appropriate benefits.

The shortage of social housing and in the case of single people, often not being classed as being in 'priority need' under the homelessness legislation, can result in newly accepted refugees staying with community members, or, in some cases, living on the streets.

## OBSTACLES TO THE SUCCESSFUL INTEGRATION AND HOUSING OF REFUGEES

- Shortage of affordable housing
- Community tensions
- Inequality of access to support services for refugees
- Lack of information on where and how refugees are living
- Poor partnership working between local stakeholders and government departments
- Refugee housing is not part of mainstream housing policy

The pressure on limited housing resources has led to a shortage of affordable housing in many parts of the UK.

Community tensions can arise in areas where refugees choose to settle, leading to safety problems.

There is a lack of information about the difficulties encountered by refugees and their host communities, as well as basic knowledge as to where refugees are choosing to settle.

There is a lack of coordination between government departments in addressing refugee integration. This can be exacerbated by poor partnership working between local stakeholders.

## RECOGNISING REFUGEES AS ASSETS AND SUPPORTING REFUGEE COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

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 and to be a benefit to the society that welcomed them.

The capabilities and potential of refugees to improve not only their situation but also that of others, as well as contributing to their host community, are increasingly being acknowledged.

Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) are run by and for refugees, providing advice and support, often informally and acting as bridges to mainstream services. They are able to form links with other community residents and help refugees to play a role in the development of their local communities. The support of specialist agencies is especially important for the smaller and more recently established RCOs. They can bring the following benefits:

- Knowing where their community members live
- Speaking the language
- Understanding the problems faced by the community members
- Having the trust of the community members who are often fearful of authorities

Needs-based approaches can prolong dependence on the state and are disempowering for refugees. RCOs adopt an asset-based approach to support refugees and often rely upon volunteers from within new communities to deliver services. Outside resources are also of vital importance, but can be used more effectively if the refugee community itself is fully mobilised.

The following support is important in helping to build the skills and capacity of RCOs:

- Training by larger voluntary sector organisations to build capacity and improve governance.
- Advice on how to access existing funding streams and other resources to support their activities
- Opportunities to share knowledge between different communities to encourage good practice and reduce the sense of isolation for small RCOs
- Partnerships that enable local public service providers to engage with and make use of the local knowledge of RCOs



## 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.

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

Experience has shown the following approaches are successful in improving the opportunities and possibilities for strong integration and cohesion:

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

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

### ESTABLISHING NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL STRATEGIC FRAMEWORKS FOR INTEGRATED ACTION

- The Home Office and the Department of Communities and Local Government (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 Housing Corporation and the National Housing Federation should work in partnership with social housing providers and Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) to increase access to good quality settled housing.
- DCLG and regional government should require local authorities to consult with and involve refugees in the design and development of relevant mainstream services, including the provision of housing.
- DCLG should require indicators of refugee integration to be included as Best Value Performance Indicators for local authorities.

### INCORPORATING REFUGEE INTEGRATION WITH IN NEW POLICY DEVELOPMENT

- HM Treasury should provide funding for refugee integration initiatives, recognising that the costs of not addressing community tension far outweigh the cost of long-term investment in community cohesion.
- DCLG should consider the needs of refugee communities in the current 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.

## IDENTIFYING ASSETS AND BUILDING CAPACITY OF REFUGEES AND REFUGEE COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

- Encourage a wider recognition of the assets of individuals and communities and understand that refugees have skills and abilities as well as needs
- 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

## CARRYING OUT RESEARCH TO IMPROVE UNDERSTANDING AND RAISE AWARENESS OF THE ASSETS AND NEEDS OF REFUGEES

- Address the shortage of research, statistical data and factual evidence as to where and how refugees are living, in order to better plan and target resources
- DCLG should 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 DTI and the Home Office should jointly commission research into the current barriers preventing social housing providers from taking a greater role in providing housing and support for refugees
- DCLG should require local authorities to include specific questions on the needs of refugees in Housing Needs Surveys

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Full details of all recommendations distilled from the three-day consultation are contained within a comprehensive report entitled *Building on Diversity: Providing homes for refugees and strengthening communities*.

This is the first in a series of three consultations organised by the Building and Social Housing Foundation, which look at meeting the housing needs of marginalised people. Subsequent consultations will address the housing needs of Gypsies and Travellers and migrant workers.

Please contact us if you would like to receive a free copy of the report, which is also available for downloading on our website at [www.bshf.org](http://www.bshf.org) (Publications section).

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