



# 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 only accounted for 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

**“Stable and safe accommodation is an essential pre-requisite to integration, without which refugees are much less likely to be able to focus on achieving their full potential and contributing to society.”**

Integration Matters: A National Strategy for Refugee Integration, Home Office, 2005

## 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 social housing providers 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

- Registered social landlords should work in partnership with the Housing Corporation, the National Housing Federation and RCOs to increase access to good quality settled housing that is appropriate to refugee needs.
- Recognise that increasing housing supply for refugees should be balanced with an increased supply for the wider population to prevent local tensions.
- Local authorities should consult with and involve refugees in the design and development of mainstream services, including housing.
- Local authorities should review housing allocation systems to ensure that they offer equality of access and address the cultural, language and literacy needs of refugees.
- 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 visit refugees and learn directly of their personal experiences and the housing issues they face.

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

- Encourage a wider recognition of the assets of individuals and communities in general in order to understand that refugees have skills and abilities, as well as needs.
- Work with RCOs to develop, support and improve the informal role that they are already playing as advisers, advocates and signposters and ensure that this essential role is incorporated into housing strategies.
- Use an asset-based approach to improving housing conditions and community cohesion, complementing the existing needs-orientated approach to supporting refugees.
- Work with the Empty Homes Agency to focus refugees' entrepreneurial flair towards recycling empty properties in order to address housing need and bring positive community benefits.

## FOSTERING PARTNERSHIP WORKING TO ACHIEVE LOCAL ACTION

- The Housing Corporation and Department of Communities and Local Government should seek to develop strategies which encourage partnerships between social housing providers and RCOs.
- Local authorities should, where appropriate, include support services for vulnerable refugee households as part of homelessness prevention grants and Supporting People funding.
- 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.
- 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.

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

- Local authorities should include specific questions on the needs of refugees in Housing Needs Surveys in order to identify trends, inform policy and target resources more effectively.

## 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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Charity number 270987

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