

Refugee Council's engagement with refugee community organisations (RCOs)

The Refugee Council exists for the benefit of refugees and asylum seekers. For many refugees and asylum seekers, refugee community organisations (RCOs) are a lifeline, supporting them in making their home in a strange land, where they face hostility and misunderstanding. It is therefore, essential to the Refugee Council that we enjoy a constructive relationship with RCOs.

The past eighteen months have been a time of change for the Refugee Council, including a period when we did not have a permanent Chair or Chief Executive. During this period of uncertainty, the interim leadership of the Refugee Council concentrated, quite rightly, on the stability and long term sustainability of the organisation. It is inevitable that, during this time, less attention was given to sustaining external relationships.

Now that the Chair, Douglas Board, and I are both in post, and have settled in, we are clear that strengthening the relationship between refugee community organisations and the Refugee Council is a priority for us.

That's why Douglas and I, and our new Director of Policy and Development, Jonathan Ellis, have been visiting a number of refugee organisations as part of our induction. We want to ensure that an understanding of the crucial work you do, and your views about the Refugee Council, influences our thinking from the start. Thanks to all of you, not just for the welcome you have given us, but to the suggestions you have made for ways in which the Refugee Council can be more responsive to the needs of refugee community organisation, and of refugees and asylum seekers.

The Refugee Council's Board of Trustees are equally committed to this. That's why they have agreed that the Refugee Council should establish a formal mechanism for engaging with RCOs. This means

that RCOs will be able to have a much more direct influence on shaping the work that the Refugee Council does - not just in supporting RCOs, but in our policy and influencing work as well.

Over the coming weeks, we will be asking you for your views on the best way for us to develop a more formal way for RCOs to influence the work of the Refugee Council. I know that many of you are also feeding into the development of our new strategic plan, which will determine the future direction of the Refugee Council.



A bingo event at the Iraqi Community Association North East (see page 3)

Refugees and asylum seekers deserve a fair deal. All too often, they do not get it, and persecution at home is followed by hostility and discrimination when they arrive in the UK. There's never been a more important time for us renew our efforts to change this.

I know that we share a passion for this work, and that the Refugee Council will be the better for improving our engagement with RCOs. Most importantly, refugees and asylum seekers will benefit if we can harness our collective energy to our common goals.

Donna Covey is chief executive of the Refugee Council

Does your RCO need a meeting room?

The Refugee Council is offering RCOs the **free** use of one its meeting rooms.

Available: Monday to Friday, 10am-5.30pm. Room capacity: 20 people maximum

To book: Contact **Jennifer Doherty** on **020 7346 6744** at least one week in advance of your meeting to check room availability.

Update on Case Resolution (formerly known as 'legacy') cases

In its Case Resolution exercise the Border and Immigration Agency (BIA) is reviewing all outstanding claims for asylum. It estimates that there are between 400,000 to 450,000 outstanding claims which it aims to resolve by summer 2011.

The BIA says that there is no general amnesty and each claim will be decided on its merits. Since the start of the Case Resolution programme in July 2006, 52,000 cases have been resolved (with 19,000 cases granted leave to remain, 17,000 discovered to be duplicate files or errors, and 16,000 cases removed from the UK).

All the outstanding claims for Case Resolution have now been allocated to one of 64 sections. The BIA will deal firstly with applications from asylum seekers who i) may pose a risk to the public, ii) receive support, iii) are more likely to be granted some form of leave and, iv) are more easily removable. Only in very exceptional or compassionate circumstances will it be possible to

get the BIA to deal with another case as a priority. See the following BIA document for further clarification of criteria for exceptional treatment www.bia.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/asylumpolicyinstructions/apunotices/crd_prioritiesexceptional.pdf

Not all cases will in future receive a questionnaire - only those BIA identifies as requiring further information. Consequently, people could be removed at short notice, so there is good reason to ensure that the BIA have full and up to date reasons why someone should be allowed to stay. If in doubt, seek legal advice now.

Children: The Refugee Children's Consortium has published a briefing on case resolution and unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum.

See www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy/briefings/2007/casesresolution_children.htm

New Asylum Model monitoring

In order to monitor the progress of the New Asylum Model, the Refugee Council recently devised a questionnaire, which was completed by clients on a one to one basis, with assistance where necessary from Refugee Council staff. The results of this will be published on our website on Thursday 31 January 2008 at

www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/namsurvey

The findings highlight concerns about how Case Ownership is working; the speed at which cases are processed; access to legal advice; reporting requirements and a need for childcare provision.

Refugee Council policy event

Are you an RCO and keen to know what the Refugee Council policy and research team are working on? If yes, then you will be interested to know that the Refugee Council is planning to hold a half-day policy event at its Brixton office in May (date to be confirmed).

The Refugee Council is very keen to hear RCOs' views on policies affecting them. This will be an opportunity for you to meet our policy and research team, to learn about our current work and priorities and to share your views on key policy issues. More information will follow in the next edition of RCO News. If you have any suggestions or questions about the event, please email gabrielle.fox@refugeecouncil.org.uk.

Changes to Section 4 accommodation process

The Regional Strategic Network of voluntary organisations working with refugees and the Strategic Migration Partnership in the West Midlands, have repeatedly raised concerns about the dispersal of Section 4 (S4) clients to other regions. On 13 December 2007, the Border and Immigration Agency (BIA) announced changes to its internal procedures for how they select the locations for S4 accommodation.

Previously, S4 clients were dispersed across the UK following a strict quota system. From now on, the BIA will aim to keep S4 applicants in the region where they were previously receiving asylum support, except for London cases (unless they can demonstrate a special circumstance that requires them to be accommodated in London). We anticipate that this will mean that a greater number of people will be able to stay within their current region. For more information see www.bia.homeoffice.gov.uk.



Sharing experience

Iraqi Community Association North East

RCO News talks to Amir Al-Nakash, Secretary of the Iraqi Community Association North East (ICANE) about their services and the needs of the Iraqi community in the north east of England.

In April 1991, a group of Iraqi people in Cleveland got together to explore the idea of starting a refugee community organisation (RCO) to support their local Iraqi community. The Iraqi Community is well established, with some having lived in the UK since 1963 because of the political situation in Iraq. Many Iraqi people refused to return to Iraq because of the political oppression that began at that time.

Because the north east is such a large area, and because people have been dispersed to different locations, there was and is a real need to bring our community together. It was decided that our RCO would provide advice and information on housing and employment, and help new refugees to settle in the area and ultimately to integrate into British culture. The Iraqi community also thought it was important to provide mother tongue classes for children to ensure that Iraqi traditions and culture were not lost.

Since then, we haven't looked back. All of our staff are volunteers. Without the strong commitment of our members who give their valuable time and money, and without their belief in the community, we wouldn't be here, 16 years later!

Over the years, we have organised many social gatherings to bring the community together, for example, Eid al Adha and Eid ul Fitr, Christmas and New Year celebrations. We also organise two seminars a year on different topics relevant to our community.

We are currently focusing on two exciting projects. These are: the establishment of a new football team, which is hoping to play in the Sunday league later this year and Arabic classes for children. These projects have been made possible through the support of Tees Valley Community Foundation.

Over the last five years we have suffered because our volunteers have been stretched to the limit, which is why we are looking to employ some paid staff. We now have support from staff at the Regional Refugee Forum North East, thanks to funding from the Northern Rock Foundation and hope they will be able to help us secure funding for part-time staff.

It is important for RCOs to get involved in the development of their local community services, which is why we attended a meeting with the Local Strategic Partnership some years ago. However, their time was taken up on another project and they didn't contact us again. This area of RCO involvement really needs to be improved.

We are very proud of what we have achieved so far, and there is still lots to do! Our motto is: "We will try our best to help, if not directly, we will put you in touch with the right person for your needs"

For more information, contact **Amir Al-Nakash** on **01642 246604** or **07949 592874** or email: **icanortheast@hotmail.co.uk**



Funding news

The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT)

The next application date for JRCT's UK grant making programmes is **28 April 2008**. The Trust makes grants for activities related to: peace and conflict resolution; promoting racial justice, including empowering black and minority ethnic people to engage in decision making and policy development; developing an appropriate relationship between people and the institutions that affect them, including accountability, and a respect for human rights across the public and private sectors. For more information see www.jrct.org.uk/

Refugee Council funding surgeries at your RCO

The Refugee Council's Development team continues its work in providing information, advice and support to RCOs in their effort to raise funds for their projects and services. Support is provided in the form of one-to-one funding surgeries, training and consultancy support. For more information on this service or to book your funding surgery session, contact **Ezechias Ngendahayo** on **020 7346 1163** or email ezechias.ngendahayo@refugeecouncil.org.uk.

Campaigns

Refugee Council re-launches vouchers campaign

Jonathan Ellis, Director of Policy and Development at the Refugee Council talks about the re-launch of Refugee Council's campaign with RCOs and other partners against the use of vouchers to support asylum seekers at the end of the process.

We (Refugee Council) know from our clients, who are using these vouchers, that they find it nearly impossible to buy travel tickets. Shops are not allowed to give change in cash, so people miss out on money they are entitled to - a major problem when you are living on £40 a week. We know that many of our clients are discriminated against because of their regular use of vouchers. And we know that because of these problems, some people are forced to sell their vouchers for cash, losing between 20-30% of their benefit.

All in all, this voucher scheme is a bad system to support asylum seekers at the end of the process. You may recall that the Refugee Council has had some success around this issue. When asylum vouchers were introduced for all asylum seekers back in 2000, we were part of a vigorous campaigning coalition, including Oxfam and the Transport and General Workers' Union that gave compelling evidence of how vouchers impact on the welfare of asylum seekers and communities. Within 18 months of implementation, these vouchers had been scrapped and asylum seekers were once more supported by cash benefits.

We are dismayed that the government has decided to go back to this failed and messy policy.

The government agreed in 2001 that the only fair course of action was a return to cash benefits. We believe that they were right then and it remains the right course of action. The government should re-introduce cash support for all end of process asylum seekers and leave this discredited system of vouchers behind for good.

For voucher campaign updates, go to www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/justfair or email **Jonathan Ellis** at jonathan.ellis@refugeecouncil.org.uk

REDRESS campaigns to help torture survivors

REDRESS is a human rights organisation that helps torture survivors obtain justice and reparation. We are supporting the Torture (Damages) Bill, a private members' bill shortly to be introduced to the House of Lords by Lord Peter Archer of Sandwell QC.

The purpose of the Bill is to enable torture survivors in the UK to have access to the courts, to bring a civil claim against those responsible for the torture. The present law does not allow survivors in the UK a forum to seek justice for the suffering they have endured.

REDRESS is in the process of gathering evidence from interested parties, including individuals who have suffered torture abroad. If you would like to contribute to the campaign for access to justice then please visit our website at www.redress.org and/or contact **Jehangir Jilani** at jehangir@redress.org.

Who's who at the Refugee Council?



Ben Chisanga – Regional Development Adviser for the north east of England

I am based in Middlesbrough and work with organisations across the north east to

help promote the successful integration of refugees in the region and build capacity within areas of dispersal to support their needs.

I do this by:

providing information, signposting and advice to assist the development of voluntary and community organisations working with refugees, including RCOs; **networking** which involves assisting local, regional and national networks of refugee organisations to build the capacity of member organisations; contributing to the development of national and regional refugee integration strategies to ensure that mainstream government policies and programmes involve refugees and promote **integration**.

Please contact me on **01642 220250** or **077875 68878** or email ben.chisanga@refugeecouncil.org.uk or benc@refugee.org.uk for further information.