

Refugee agencies policy response



Inter-agency partnership response to Commission on Integration and Cohesion Consultation

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About the inter-agency partnership

The Asylum Support Programme Inter-Agency Partnership (IAP) consists of six agencies: Refugee Council, Refugee Action, Migrant Helpline, Refugee Arrivals Project, Scottish Refugee Council and Welsh Refugee Council. It also includes representations from subcontractors and refugee community organisations (RCOs).

The IAP delivers asylum support services to asylum seekers across the U.K. as contracted by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). IAP advises and assists asylum seekers with their asylum support applications, and provides subsidiary advice to failed asylum seekers requiring support. This consultation response has been prepared by the Inter-Agency Co-Ordination Team (ICT) on behalf of the IAP.

About the agencies

The Refugee Council is the largest organisation in the UK working with asylum seekers and refugees. We not only give help and support to asylum seekers and refugees, but also work with them to ensure their needs and concerns are addressed by decision-makers.

Refugee Arrivals Project (RAP), is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that provides humanitarian assistance and support services to new applicant asylum seekers and refugees. Through its work RAP seeks to influence the development of refugee policy for all asylum seekers and refugees.

Migrant Helpline has a long history of working with asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in the South East. As well as providing direct services we proactively promote awareness of the issues surrounding our clients and work with host communities to assist with integration.

Refugee Action is an independent national charity that works with refugees to build new lives in the UK. With 25 years of experience in reception, resettlement, development and integration, we provide advice and support to asylum seekers and refugees in 10 regions across England.

Scottish Refugee Council provides help and advice to those who have fled human rights abuses or other persecution in their homeland and now seek refuge in Scotland. We are a membership organisation that works independently and in partnership with others to provide support to refugees from arrival to settlement and integration into Scottish society. We campaign to ensure that the UK Government meets its international, legal and humanitarian obligations and to raise awareness of refugee issues.

The Welsh Refugee Council (WRC) empowers refugees and asylum seekers to rebuild their lives in Wales. It provides advice, support and information to asylum seekers and refugees and advocates and campaigns for refugee rights as enshrined in international law.

Recommendations

1. A more comprehensive consultation exercise should be carried out to examine integration and cohesion throughout the U.K., from both a U.K.-wide and a regional perspective.
2. The role and objectives of the former National Refugee Integration Forum should be taken on by new fora which enable a wide range of stakeholders to contribute to effective refugee integration.
3. Assistance should be given to enable refugees to meet the requirements of citizenship procedures.
4. Action should be taken to resolve the backlog of so called 'legacy' asylum cases as soon as possible, bearing in mind the need to make a full and fair assessment of each case.
5. Ways must be found of incorporating into society those who have lost their asylum claim but cannot for various reasons be returned to their country of origin. As a minimum they should receive subsistence support, access to public services and help to overcome language barriers.
6. Once recognised as having a right to remain in the U.K., refugees should be granted indefinite leave to remain (ILR) and not given time-limited 5 year status.
7. All asylum seekers and refugees should be entitled to a level of support which meets their basic needs and does not mean that they are set apart from other members of the community because of extreme poverty or destitution, and they should receive assistance to find appropriate employment and targeted specialist services that facilitate access to the mainstream.
8. Proposals to provide unaccompanied asylum seeking children with services should comply with the standards laid down in the Children (Leaving Care) Act and the Every Child Matters agenda.
9. Once the Home Office has granted the right to remain in the U.K., family reunion should be available and assistance should be given to arrange this.
10. Efforts should be made to promote real contact between asylum seekers and refugees and local people, through regular social, artistic and sporting events, mentoring, volunteering, befriending and hosting schemes and opportunities to pursue common interests and hobbies.
11. Easily accessible, affordable and effective English language support for speakers of other languages should be provided, which includes flexible, targeted help for those with different levels of English.
12. Volunteering opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees should be more widely available, and organisations should be appropriately resourced to support asylum seekers and refugees to volunteer.
13. Reliable, impartial sources of information about asylum seekers and refugees, should be made available to host communities, with the chance to have any questions answered.
14. Central and local government should systematically take the lead in challenging irresponsible media reports through letters and complaints and encouraging positive news reporting.
15. Attention needs to be given to developing effective and appropriate strategies for responding to the needs of asylum seekers and refugees who are victims of hate crime.
16. Asylum seekers and refugees should be helped to take part in decision making processes and fora, for example those affecting the planning, design and evaluation of local services.
17. Refugee community organisations should play a full part in representing the interests of asylum seekers and refugees locally and should be given the resources and support to develop their capacity.

Introduction

This response gives a brief summary of the most important points to consider when incorporating the experiences and aspirations of asylum seekers and refugees into efforts to promote cohesion and integration. Although the Commission requests information on experiences in England, asylum seekers live in communities across the U.K. and a more comprehensive consultation exercise should be carried out to examine integration and cohesion throughout the U.K. The inter- agency partnership includes agencies that work with asylum seekers and refugees in Wales and Scotland and we would emphasise the importance of understanding integration and cohesion from both a regional and a U.K.-wide perspective.

We strongly advise an approach that draws on good practice from local initiatives, projects and processes in communities across the U.K., further examples of these can be given on request. This can best be achieved by developing structures for information sharing, policy development and evaluation of implementation which include representatives of national and local government, and community leaders particularly leaders from refugee communities. To this end, the role and objectives of the former National Refugee Integration Forum should be taken on by new fora which enable a wide range of stakeholders to contribute to effective refugee integration.

Qu1: What does 'cohesion' mean to you? What does 'integration' mean to you? What might a community which is both integrated and cohesive look like?

Cohesion is a state of community relationships where mutual understanding, communication, trust and social bonds over-ride differences and isolation.

We support the definition of refugee integration developed by ECRE. For asylum seekers and refugees, integration is a process which begins on arrival in the U.K. It is a two-way process, requiring action from both the individual and the host community. It requires flexibility on the part of individuals, communities and mainstream service providers and targeted specialist services that promote access to the mainstream.

Cohesion and integration should produce peaceful, respectful, safe, confident, co-operative and vibrant communities, which are welcoming of difference, and which recognise equality of opportunity so that individuals feel a sense of belonging and can participate as equals in civic, social, economic and political aspects of community life.

Asylum seekers and refugees, and refugee community organisations can make important contributions to achieving such communities.

Qu 2: What do you think are the main tensions between different groups in our communities? and

Qu 4: Why do you think people from different backgrounds may live parallel or separate lives?

The conditions of poverty and in some circumstances destitution which affect large numbers of asylum seekers and refugees, and uncertainty about their right to remain in the U.K., inevitably set them apart from others in the communities where they live.

Under the current asylum system, asylum seekers have no right to work and those asylum seekers who are entitled to support receive far less in cash allowances than is paid to those other U.K. residents who are entitled to Job Seekers Allowance, and so asylum seekers are living in conditions of poverty more extreme than most other groups. Some asylum seekers receive no support because they did not claim asylum immediately on entering the U.K. and others receive no support because their claim for asylum has been rejected but they cannot be returned to their country of origin. These groups are destitute, surviving from day to day on the margins of society. The voucher system stigmatises clients and impoverishes them further. If they need to go to shops which don't accept vouchers, and therefore have to exchange vouchers for cash on a local black market, they don't receive 100% of their value. Even once asylum seekers have been recognised as refugees, bureaucratic delays to entering the benefit system can prolong hardship. Once refugees can access benefits or have the right to work, repayment of debts accumulated while living in poverty and destitution makes it harder for them to get on their feet. There is a knock on effect for other refugees who feel obligated to share what

little they have with those who are destitute.

Proposals suggest unaccompanied asylum seeking children are also likely to be treated differently from those with the right to remain in the U.K. A current consultation paper proposes that care for separated children should be provided under contract from the Home Office by a limited number of local authorities; a proposal which could undermine the inclusive policies of both individual local authorities and the government's Every Child Matters agenda. Furthermore, care and support for former unaccompanied children whose asylum claims have not been successful but who cannot be removed from the U.K. is proposed to be taken out of the framework of the Children (Leaving Care) Act. Although the Home Office sets targets about the time it should take to process asylum claims, thousands of people have been waiting years for their case to be resolved because a backlog exists. In such circumstances, planning for the future is difficult. For those who are granted leave to remain in the U.K. the practice of granting leave for 5 years only also affects the ability to plan, pursue education and training, and develop careers. Those who wish to become British citizens are required to take citizenship tests, and success in these depends on acquiring a good standard of English.

Lack of understanding and acceptance of asylum seekers and refugees by host communities are compounded by communication difficulties and the attitudes promoted by some sections of the media.

Concern about the arrival of newcomers is a natural human response which needs to be addressed sensitively in order to avoid escalation. In the case of asylum seekers and refugees, while there have been remarkable instances of local people seeking to offer friendship and assistance, attention has focussed on the increasing hostility exhibited by local communities over the last decade. Harassment of asylum seekers and refugees is common, especially in communities with little diversity, but is rarely reported to the authorities because the procedures are not understood, or because of fears it will affect the right to remain in the U.K.

Where tension exists, a major factor is communication problems between locals and those asylum seekers and refugees who speak no English, which leads to misunderstandings, and makes the transfer of information and the development of friendship more difficult. Provision of English language classes is patchy and insufficient to meet the needs of asylum seekers and refugees. Proposals to restrict eligibility for free English classes are misguided.

Alongside this, the media, particularly popular sections of the national press, have sometimes used their powerful position as representatives of public opinion, to promote alarmist and critical perceptions of asylum seekers and refugees. As an example, media stories blaming asylum seekers and refugees for shortages in public services resonate with deprived communities. In a small number of communities political rhetoric arising from an active BNP presence is similarly detrimental to integration and cohesion.

Cultural, ethnic and racial differences affect community relations in complex ways. Reactions to asylum seekers and refugees from policy makers and from local communities should be seen not only as relating to immigration and human rights but more widely as about attitudes to race. In recent years, increased fears about terrorism mean that racial and cultural differences add to suspicions of newcomers to a greater extent than previously. It is also important to recognise the tensions which may exist between refugees of different communities, which can reflect divisions in the country of origin. It is particularly important that asylum seekers and refugees who may have suffered repression because of their cultural identity in their country of origin feel safe to express this in the U.K. so long as it does not harm others. Too often circumstances lead to asylum seekers and refugees feeling ashamed of their immigration status or cultural identity and the desire to seek support only from others of a similar background encourages segregation.

Qu 3: What things do you think help people from different backgrounds feel like they belong?

Qu 5: What contributing role do you see for organisations and institutions?

Qu 6: What help do new people to a community need when they arrive? What help do existing residents need to cope with change in their community?

Qu 7: What do you see as effective ways to counteract people's negative perceptions of and **Page 5 of 9**

attitudes to people from different backgrounds?

As soon as possible, asylum seekers and refugees need assurance that they can remain in the U.K. long term, and become U.K. citizens.

For those refugees who have been granted leave to remain and who wish to apply for U.K. citizenship, sufficient assistance should be given to enable individuals to meet the requirements of citizenship procedures.

Prompt action should be taken to resolve the backlog of so called 'legacy' cases who have been waiting for extended periods for the Home Office to make decisions on their cases. This must be done with due regard to the need to make a full and fair assessment of each case. The Home Office should also find ways of incorporating into society those who have lost their asylum claim but cannot for various reasons be returned to their country of origin. This is particularly important for families who have exhausted their right of appeal against a refused asylum claim, but who cannot return, and are attempting to raise children 'in limbo'.

It is important that, once recognised as having a right to remain in the U.K., refugees are granted indefinite leave to remain (ILR) which gives them the confidence to plan for the future and feel a sense of belonging that helps them participate in local activities.

Again, the impact on children is of particular concern. Unaccompanied children seeking asylum who are temporarily allowed to remain in the U.K. face the prospect that, at age 18, possibly after years in the U.K., they may be refused leave to remain.

Proposals to provide unaccompanied asylum seeking children with services which fall short of the standards laid down in the Children (Leaving Care) Act and the Every Child Matters agenda, should be rejected.

Asylum seekers and refugees need a level of subsistence which does not set them apart from others, with equivalent opportunities to improve their living standards in the future.

Since integration begins on arrival, all asylum seekers and refugees should be entitled to a level of support which meets their basic needs and does not mean that they are set apart from other members of the community because of extreme poverty or destitution. As a minimum they should receive subsistence support, access to public services and help to overcome language barriers. As far as possible asylum seekers and refugees should be assisted in achieving self-sufficiency and contributing to the community through meaningful, appropriate employment. This includes access to work which allows them to use existing skills and qualifications and develop new ones through training and volunteering, with prospects for resuming broken careers and achieving prosperity. Initiatives such as ASSET-UK, Refugees into Business, and the Refugee Teachers project, need support to become more widely available.

While employment opportunities and subsistence support are vital, also important are access to good quality housing and to decent schools which have the resources and skills to address the needs of asylum seeking and refugee children.

To achieve this, targeted specialist services that facilitate access to the mainstream are vital, and the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees must be reflected in equality policies.

Asylum seekers and refugees need support to make contact with and provide support to separated family members, and if necessary to be re-united with them.

It is common for asylum seekers and refugees to be separated from immediate family and anxiety about the welfare of missing relatives can be overwhelming and hamper integration. Services which seek to trace family members deserve every possible support. Networks which allow communication with and transfer of money and practical assistance to separated relatives should be made more effective. Once the Home Office has granted the right to remain in the U.K., family reunion should be available and assistance should be given to arrange this. In the cases of children who arrive in the U.K.

unaccompanied by an adult relative, this is particularly important. The responsibility of providing for newly arrived relatives means it is especially important that refugees are able to find appropriate work or have access to other forms of support.

friendships and challenge media misrepresentations promote integration and cohesion between asylum seekers and refugees and host communities.

In order to break down suspicion and misconception about asylum seekers and refugees, spaces need to be created for them to have real contact with local people, through regular social, artistic and sporting events, mentoring, befriending and hosting schemes and opportunities to pursue common interests and hobbies. Efforts should be made to recognise the contribution that refugees have made to the U.K. and to celebrate diversity. Particular attention should be given to including children in such activities, and those who for other reasons may be marginalised or face practical barriers to participation. Central to this aim is the provision of easily accessible, affordable and effective English language support for speakers of other languages, which includes flexible, targeted help for those with different levels of English. Plans to restrict access to free English classes should be reversed.

Volunteering gives many benefits, including social contact, improved self – respect, and the chance to practise English, develop an employment record and gain references, as well as providing a resource for employers. Volunteering opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees should be more widely available, and organisations should be appropriately resourced to support asylum seekers and refugees to volunteer.

Host communities need reliable, impartial sources of information about asylum seekers and refugees, with the chance to have any questions answered. This should be made available through various channels and in a range of formats. One example are the 'Talks Teams', who provide hundreds of talks in schools in several U.K. regions. The development of representative organisations based on refugee communities or faith groups can be key to building bridges with equivalent institutions in the host community.

Irresponsible media reports which undermine efforts to promote understanding between asylum seekers and refugees and host communities. Central and local government should take note of recommendations made by ICAR (Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees) and systematically take the lead in challenging irresponsible media reports through letters and complaints. These can also be countered by encouraging positive news reporting, for example coverage of Gateway refugee arrivals in Sheffield, Bolton, and Hull and reports about successful refugee entrepreneurs and students. Positive statements to the media from politicians and local and national government officials contribute to a more tolerant climate, but the opposite is also true, and politicians should avoid use of hostile and emotive language in discussions about asylum seekers and refugees.

Attention needs to be given to developing effective and appropriate strategies for responding to the needs of asylum seekers and refugees who are victims of hate crime, including the development of local third party reporting centres.

Asylum seekers and refugees benefit from opportunities to learn about British laws and cultural norms, and to be part of decision making bodies.

Asylum seekers and refugees benefit from access to orientation advice where they can learn about British culture, norms, laws, institutions, etc. and it is important to ensure that there is capacity in local agencies to provide such advice, and to answer questions. Research underway at the Refugee Council suggests that currently few refugees have been asked their opinion on a local issue and they are sceptical that the political system could work to improve their lives. Integration requires that asylum seekers and refugees are not merely passive members of communities, but also that they feel able to take part in decision making processes and fora, for example those affecting the planning, design and evaluation of local services. The six organisations that make up the inter-agency partnership benefit hugely from the skills of refugees who are among their staff and trustees.

Refugee community organisations act as active agents in the integration of asylum seekers and refugees, through practical support and through their links with the wider community. It is important that refugee community organisations are not marginalised but play a full part representing **Page 7 of 9**

the interests of asylum seekers and refugees in local voluntary sector networks and cross sector partnerships, and are given the resources and support to develop their capacity.

The six organisations that make up the inter-agency partnership are working to address the issues raised in this paper, in centres across the U.K., offering a range of services including advice, practical assistance, training and community development.

Further evidence

We draw the Commission's attention to the following publications which provide important additional information and make useful recommendations.

Ted Cattle, *Community Cohesion Report of the Independent Review Team*, Home Office, 2001
ECRE, *Position on the Integration of Refugees in Europe*, ECRE, 2002
Alistair Ager and Alison Strang, *Indicators of Integration*, Home Office, 2004
Refugee Council, *Agenda for Integration*, Refugee Council, 2004
Sarah Spencer (ed.), *Refugees and other new migrants: A review of the evidence on successful approaches to integration*, COMPAS, 2005
David Robinson and Kesia Reeve, *Neighbourhood experiences of new immigration*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006
Joint Committee on Human Rights, *The Treatment of Asylum Seekers Tenth report of session 2006-07*, House of Lords and Commons, 2007
Refugee Action, *The Destitution Trap*, Refugee Action, 2006
Amnesty International U.K., *Down and Out in London: The road to destitution for rejected asylum seekers*, Amnesty International U.K., 2006
Maggie Cramb & Jo Hudek, *Independent evaluation of Gateway refugee resettlement programme*, Resettlement Inter-Agency Partnership, 2005
Yorkshire & Humberside Regional Consortium, *Regional Integration Strategy for refugees*, Yorkshire & Humberside Regional Consortium, 2003-6
Berhanu Kassayie, *A National Framework for Refugee Community Development*, Praxis, for the National Refugee Integration Forum, 2005
Kate Smart, Roger Grimshaw et al, Reporting Asylum: *The UK Press and the Effectiveness of PCC Guidelines – March 2007*, ICAR, 2007
Initial findings: Refugee Council, *Refugees' Experiences of Integration project* forthcoming September 2007.