

Refugee Council conference report



Building Communities: Equality and diversity in action

New Connaught Rooms, London
28 November 2007

About the Refugee Council

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. To find out more about what we do please visit www.refugeecouncil.org.uk.

Aims and objectives of the conference

The past year has seen massive developments in the fields of refugee integration, community cohesion, and equality and diversity. This creates new challenges for those working with refugees and asylum seekers to facilitate integration, at a time when Government efforts to speed case resolution are increasing pressure on the capacity of service providers to meet demands.

The conference was set in the context of the new Home Office model for processing asylum applications and its proposals for national refugee integration services; the Commission on Integration and Cohesion's June 2007 report, *Our Shared Future*; and the launch of the new Equality and Human Rights Commission. The conference speakers stressed that the distinct needs and experiences of refugees must be reflected in these developments, and captured in policy making.

Conference speakers and delegates considered what is meant by community cohesion, and equality and diversity, as these ideas relate to asylum seekers and refugees; and they focused on particular disadvantages asylum seekers and refugees face when trying to integrate. Key dynamics for successful integration in education, housing provision and employment were discussed.

The conference aimed to:

- bring together front-line staff and policymakers from a range of backgrounds
- identify potential needs of refugees and asylum seekers within the context of overall service provision
- clarify the legislative and policy background
- consider the subjective and practical barriers faced by refugees and asylum seekers
- discuss recommendations for ensuring access to services.

The conference was chaired by **Donna Covey**, Chief Executive of the Refugee Council. Delegates from voluntary organisations, refugee community organisations and statutory agencies heard four speakers in the morning session and four in the afternoon session. In addition, in the morning and the afternoon there were panel discussions in which panellists responded to delegates' questions.

The four speakers during the morning were **Meg Hillier**, **Danny Sriskandarajah**, **Leonie McCarthy** and **Jonathan Ellis**. The panel consisted of **Danny Sriskandarajah** and **Leonie McCarthy**, joined by **Olvia Fellas**, **Nargis Khan** and **Bereket Loul**. In the afternoon session the speakers were **Inderjit Bhogal**, **Roger Kline**, **Jon Williams** and **Heather Petch**. In the panel discussion **Theodros Abraham** and **James Lee** joined **Roger Kline** and **Heather Petch**.

The Refugee Council would like to express thanks to all speakers, panel members and delegates, and to the volunteers who helped to ensure the smooth running of the conference. Thanks are due also to the conference sponsors: the New Economics Foundation, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, TimeBank and Patchwork UK.

While the Refugee Council welcomes a diverse range of speakers and panel members, the views and opinions expressed by them in the conference are not necessarily those of the Refugee Council.

Morning session: speakers

The conference was opened by **Donna Covey**, Chief Executive, Refugee Council. She welcomed delegates, saying that the conference would be looking at how refugee integration fitted into community cohesion. The emphasis would be on three areas which refugees have said are most important for integration: education, employment and housing. What the speakers said and what the delegates said would inform the Refugee Council's work.

The keynote address was given by **Meg Hillier MP**, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Identity. A former journalist, Meg Hillier has worked or campaigned on housing issues for a decade. She has been a councillor in the London borough of Islington and she was a member of the London Assembly from 2000-2004, when she stood down after her selection as parliamentary candidate for Hackney South and Shoreditch. She was elected to Parliament in 2005 and became a Minister in July 2007. Her talk was on **Building communities: equality and diversity in action**.

Meg Hillier said that she had felt privileged when she found that her portfolio as a Minister included refugee integration. She pointed out that 400-500 people gain refugee status each month. How can they have the opportunity to contribute to society?

Much still needs to be done to improve both casework and the 12 months' support to be received by those who get status. Evaluation of the support pilots in the SUNRISE programme has shown the value of the support offered. However, monitoring has also revealed the troubling fact that no more than 10 per cent of those involved were in employment when they exited the programme.

The Commission on Integration and Cohesion, in its June 2007 report *Our Shared Future* (www.integrationandcohesion.org.uk/our_final_report.aspx) set out a 10-point action plan. The main focus is to be on the integration of new migrants. Officials of both the Home Office and the Department of Communities and Local Government are working on using the action plan as a vehicle for greater integration. But the issue is not just one for government. Employment is a major concern, overall, the employment of refugees is about 40 per cent so there is a need for all of us to 'step up our game' to tackle this.

The Government must focus resources, so refugee support has to be clearly targeted. A stronger regional emphasis should help in this, and should make it possible to involve refugee community organisations (RCOs) more fully. Advice-giving must be of high quality, and the Government's emphasis will be on outcomes. At the end of the support period, people should be able to support themselves.

Looking to future developments, Meg Hillier drew the attention of delegates to the European Refugee Fund phase 3, with a budget of a million pounds to be administered by the Home Office. She asked RCOs to let her know whether it would be useful for the Home Office to run a workshop to help RCOs, or consortia of RCOs, to make applications to the Fund.

Her first few months as a Minister had been spent getting to grips with her own responsibilities. However, refugee integration is clearly a matter in which many central government departments have an interest and a responsibility. She is now making contact with relevant officials in the Department of Health, the Department of Communities and Local Government, the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and others.

Issues of refugee integration cannot be looked at in isolation. As is well known, there is a regular flow of migrants into the UK, presenting a range of challenges. The Migration Advisory Committee has been established to provide independent, objective advice from labour market experts about where migration can sensibly fill gaps in the economy. Another new body, the Migration Impacts Forum, considers the impact of migration on local areas and on service providers. The Forum is co-chaired by Liam Byrne MP (Home Office) and Parmjit Dhanda MP (Department of Communities and Local Government), and its membership includes Donna Covey along with representatives from local government, the CBI and others. Its role is to collate existing evidence, recommend good practice and identify possible areas for new government research.

Meg Hillier said there had been an improvement in turn-around time for new asylum applications, and from December legacy cases will have case owners. She pointed out that 'every asylum seeker who arrives is a potential citizen'. Lord Goldsmith's Citizenship Review, launched in October, will report to the Prime Minister in March. The aim is to articulate more clearly the significance of citizenship, and develop recommendations to ensure an appropriate approach to issues of migration, identity and civic participation (see www.justice.gov.uk/reviews/citizenship.htm). The Government wants to welcome new citizens, including refugees. She urged delegates to hold local events (if they have the capacity to do so) in order to ask those who have recently become citizens, or aspirant citizens, or others, what they want from citizenship. She spoke recently with Lord Goldsmith, and he said he is keen to hear from people directly what citizenship means for them. She will be asking people in her own constituency, and it would be good to have ideas from around the country.

In conclusion, Meg Hillier reiterated the importance of people with refugee status gaining employment. She said that she recognises the complexities, but all the evidence shows that if people have a job it gives them real opportunities to integrate better. That is the reason for the Home Office emphasis on employment.

The first question to the Minister was from a delegate who raised the issue of compulsory ID cards for foreigners: wasn't this likely to be self-defeating in terms of the aims of integration and social cohesion? He also expressed concern that the fee for registering his son as a British citizen would be £400. Meg Hillier said she disagreed that ID cards will be 'self-defeating'. One of the reasons for introducing the cards is security. Initially they will be for foreign students because issues of impersonation have to be tackled. The cards will help us secure our borders. Currently fingerprints are being taken for visas, and that is already revealing some 'quite risky people' trying to get into the UK. But there is another reason to introduce ID cards: making it clear that if you are a British citizen you have certain rights and privileges, and if you're not you do have rights and privileges, but not necessarily to the same level as a citizen. Having a card will mark you out only when you have to produce it for someone. All of us have to produce documents on some occasions and when you go for a job you have to show proof that you are a British citizen or have a legal right to work. In any case, over time, when ID cards are rolled out and every resident has one we'll see less concern about them. In relation to the delegate's concern about the level of registration fees, she said that being a British citizen gives certain privileges and there is a cost to that. Although she accepted that those who have just gained status may not have the money, as more refugees get into good jobs the easier the £400 will be. However, Lord Goldsmith may choose to comment on fees in his Review.

Another delegate expressed surprise that the Minister hadn't referred to the Government's refugee employment strategy, published after lengthy consultation with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Jobcentre Plus (*Working to Rebuild Lives*, 2005, www.dwp.gov.uk). He said that the substantial number of people in the 'stock' as opposed to the relatively small number in the 'flow' remains of considerable concern. What are the Home Office's intentions as the lead body? Meg Hillier confirmed that the 40 per cent figure was from the DWP. She recognised that there is an issue about the stock but it is necessary to take things in stages. She had concentrated on the flow in her talk because it was important that people coming through now should get support. People in the stock

may not have jobs, but they may have integrated into communities. More work is required on this, and also on the issue of people who have been here some time but are still not in appropriate jobs.

In another question about refugee employment, a delegate pointed out that refugees may take many steps to prepare themselves for employment but then, despite hundreds of applications, fail to obtain a job; is there a need to encourage employers to consider applications from refugees? Meg Hillier said that there is still a great deal of discrimination; it is an endemic problem, despite legislation. Even with qualifications, it can be a challenge to surmount the hurdles. It is necessary to work away at attitudes, and make sure the public sector is using its weight. She noted that she is currently working with the Department of Health on a programme to get refugee health workers into health-related employment, and said she would be raising questions about the extent to which government agencies were practising what they preached.

Returning to the subject of fees, a delegate expressed concern that the fee for indefinite leave to remain had been raised to £700. The Minister said the rise results from a review of fees. The process has to pay for itself; she can see no justification for subsidising fees, although she recognises that the level now set creates problems for some people.

The next speaker was **Dhananjayan (Danny) Sriskandarajah**, Director of Research Strategy and Head of Migration, Equalities and Citizenship, Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). He spoke on **Refugees and community cohesion**. Dr Sriskandarajah has been a consultant to international organisations, a trustee of several charities, and a non-executive director of a leading equalities consultancy. He directs several major research projects and is the author of books, reports and journal articles; he writes regularly for the press and frequently gives broadcast interviews.

He started by stressing the importance of feeding information from the refugee sector into the current widespread discussion of migration, integration and community cohesion. He noted that refugees arrive in the UK from countries where there is often little cohesion, where there are high levels of conflict and/or lack of political rights and liberties. A IPPR report looking at conditions in countries of origin of refugees can be found at www.ippr.org.

In the UK, there are now complex migration patterns, and rising public concerns about race and immigration. In some areas there are more subtle and complex community tensions than ever seen previously in the UK. There are differing views on whether segregation is increasing or decreasing, worries about extremist threats, and considerable distrust of political leadership. There has been 'tough talk' from some political leaders. This is the landscape of discussion around cohesion, and we have to engage with it.

Danny Sriskandarajah then turned to IPPR research published in October 2007: *From Refugee to Citizen: 'standing on my own two feet'*, by Jill Rutter with L.Cooley, S.Reynolds and R.Sheldon (www.refugeesupport.org.uk and www.ippr.org). The research is based on 30 life history interviews with forced migrants who arrived in the UK between 1956 and 2006. Interviewees were aged between 16 and 68 years and came from 15 countries; 12 were women. The interviews were supplemented by other evidence. The book explores the relationships between refugee integration and citizenship, Britishness and community cohesion.

He said that many of the findings will be familiar to delegates. Rapid asylum decisions appear to promote early integration. Secure housing helps - 'you can't keep moving people around and expect them to feel settled'. Half the interviewees had studied in universities in their home countries, but many found that their skills and experience were not easily transferable to the UK labour market; their potential was not being realised, and they were not able to contribute as fully as they would have liked. Settled refugees tended to have the most successful careers, but even they had been

under-employed for long periods. Importantly, 26 interviewees said that they felt British or English, or held identities which incorporated Britishness.

Some worrying trends will also be familiar. Most of the interviewees arrived speaking little or no English. However, all but one of the pre-2000 arrivals had access to English classes, while many of those who arrived later received no language support at all when they first came. Time-limited settlement since 2005 appears to be hampering integration, especially where refugees sacrifice long-term aspirations for short-term survival. Those who arrive as children might appear to have better opportunities to integrate, but in practice they often faced 'incredibly high barriers'.

Twenty-two of the 30 interviewees had made friends with those from their own community, other migrants resident in the UK, and people whom they considered to be British. However, only four felt they were friends with their neighbours and 21 had experienced racial harassment, such as name calling, verbal abuse and damage to their property. The unfriendliness of neighbours and hostile social interactions prevented most interviewees feeling that they belonged in their locality. There appears to be a 'discongruity of belonging', in which integration is experienced through recognition and celebration of British values but at local level harassment means they don't feel they belong.

Many of those interviewed were the 'active citizens' whom the Government wants to encourage. Values such as tolerance, freedom and human rights were the most-cited aspects of Britishness. All but two of the 20 adult interviewees with the right to vote in the UK exercised this right; some felt they were privileged to be able to do so. Four respondents were active members of UK political parties. Some 26 respondents had undertaken volunteering (not just in refugee organisations) and all but one of these continues to do so.

Drawing on these findings and other sources, Danny Sriskandarajah set out a number of recommendations. He argued that 'refugee experiences cannot be ignored in community cohesion strategies; indeed their experiences may be the litmus test for how well we are doing'. He said that better understanding is required; integration is rarely a linear process, and familial and intergenerational aspects may be important. We have to be realistic about support networks of families and communities; they can help integration, but in some cases can hinder it. Better interventions are required to promote local belonging, for the sake of refugees but also to promote wider cohesion; this cannot be done through measures that create disincentives to integration such as time-limited status. Bold action may be required to give people a chance to participate in communities, and perhaps the most effective would be a regularisation programme for asylum legacy cases to bring people out of the shadows. Community cohesion needs to be adequately resourced. Finally, none of this will work without committed political leadership.

A delegate expressed surprise that the list of recommendations didn't include anything about interpreting and translation services. Recent Government emphasis on learning English seemed to underestimate the continuing need for such services. For example, even when people speak some English, they may well need the help of interpreters when trying to access mental health services, or cancer services. Danny Sriskandarajah said that the full list of recommendations in the report does include interpreting and translation; more resources are clearly required for these. He noted that the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant, used for English language teaching in schools, is being increased but this will not be sufficient to meet the increasing levels of need. In response to concern expressed about the citizenship test and the five-year limit, he noted that IPPR would be submitting evidence to Lord Goldsmith's Review about two large groups of people insufficiently considered in Government citizenship and naturalisation initiatives. One group is those not particularly interested in becoming British citizens. For example, Polish immigrants might live here for decades but feel no need to become citizens. The second group is those people without status, or who have status but can't afford the fees required to become a citizen; 'they will be forced to linger in this state of not belonging'.

Leonie McCarthy, Project Manager, New Link Asylum and Migration Service, then spoke on **Communities working together - what works**. She set up and managed the first British Red Cross Refugee and Asylum Seeker service in the UK, and was one of the first Accredited Peer Mentors in Integration and Cohesion for the Improvement and Development Agency for Local Government. In addition to her work with New Link she also leads a national Pathfinder Project on tackling violent extremism through working with Muslim communities and increasing community capacity to combat extremism. In August 2006 she became a member of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion.

Leonie McCarthy said that discovering what works in community cohesion was an on-going process and that some mistakes were made in initial attempts to integrate new arrivals in Peterborough. She identified what went wrong, and what had been done to reach a position where Peterborough is seen as providing innovative and good practice in some areas.

Peterborough has a history of absorbing waves of new arrivals. After the Second World War Polish, Lithuanian, Italian, Pakistani and East African migrants gradually arrived. However, in 2001 Peterborough became a designated dispersal area for asylum seekers, and within a year there were people of 56 nationalities living in the city. Those given leave to remain began to form communities and people of the same origins started to join them from other parts of the country. There were other arrivals from European Union states, such as several thousand Portuguese nationals.

Many people initially had limited awareness of the different status and rights of asylum seekers, migrant workers, illegal workers and refugees, and limited awareness of any services to which they might be entitled. Agencies had to spend scarce resources on interpreting services, yet both new arrivals and service providers were increasingly frustrated. Confusion reigned, with asylum seekers sent to the Jobcentre and migrants to NASS.

In her work at the Red Cross it became apparent that some of the new arrivals had dire needs: for accommodation, for a solicitor, for dealing with harassment. But as new arrivals increasingly came into her office bringing friends who spoke English it also became apparent that many people in the city had language skills which could be utilised; eventually 100 people were volunteering.

A multi-agency approach was needed, however. The City Council, the police and the health authorities jointly made a bid to the Home Office for an 'Invest to Save' grant. In return for a grant, it was proposed to achieve cost reductions through:

- interpreting and translation: a project to train and qualify people who had the languages needed by agencies
- a joined up approach: one place in the city where new arrivals could go in order to be directed to the appropriate agencies
- reducing tension: work with community groups to build capacity and to reduce possible tension between groups.

The bid was successful, but some local residents were resentful that £2.1 million was to be used to help new arrivals. However, negative opinions were placated by support from a Refugee Council staff member, Hana Fazal, Press Officer for the Regions. She helped Leonie McCarthy and her colleagues think through the answers to questions such as 'Why *would* the settled communities want this? What benefit will the project be to them? And how will the project integrate new arrivals?'

Rethinking the project meant that rather than people coming in, being informed and sent on their way, they were asked what their level of English was. If good, they were referred to the interpreting and translation project; if not, a referral was made to an English class. Meetings were held with residents' associations to talk about plans for integrating new arrivals. There were many myths about new arrivals having no skills, so new arrivals were asked about their skills and settled communities were given factual information. Also, when New Link learned of newcomers with skills who were working in local factories, they liaised with employers to get information to such workers about relevant courses for maintaining their skills or developing new ones. She said that there were complaints that new arrivals were blocking hospital Accident & Emergency services, so new arrivals were helped to register with a GP. Relationships were built with community groups so new arrivals could be directed to a local group when there was one; when there wasn't, New Link offered a support worker's services to help establish a group.

She said that the Refugee Council developed a citizenship course for New Link, based on asking new arrivals what they needed to know. The course kept evolving: as more was learned of settled residents' concerns, this material was fed in. The questions which New Link asked new arrivals also continued evolving as more issues surfaced - issues such as lack of rent books, or payment below the minimum wage.

Leonie McCarthy said that there are still major challenges. Local residents' lives have changed, partly because of the arrival of asylum seekers but certainly because of immigration. In what were settled family streets, property has been bought up by landlords; some are unscrupulous and house 10 or 15 people in one property. The knock-on effects for residents in those streets have been massive. On-street parking spaces are often inadequate, dumped household rubbish is unsightly and can encourage rats, there are issues about loud music. Residents are now encouraged to contact New Link about problematic neighbours. Fifteen people from refugee and migrant communities have been trained as facilitators who will visit the resident and discuss the issues, then go next door and, if appropriate, explain 'When in Rome ...'. Another issue has been occasional fraught relationships within and between new communities. New Link now works with the various communities on a continuing basis.

The last presentation in the morning session was by **Jonathan Ellis**. After the panel discussion he spoke on **Refugees' experiences of integration**. Jonathan Ellis is the Director of Policy & Development, Refugee Council. As a campaign manager for Oxfam he worked with the Refugee Council and the Transport & General Workers Union on the campaign to abolish asylum vouchers. He was Director of the Empty Homes Agency and led the campaign which resulted in major changes to the Housing Act 2004. He leads training sessions on campaigning and writes on the subject.

In his talk Jonathan Ellis outlined research conducted by the Refugee Council and the University of Birmingham and published in September 2007. The report is entitled *Refugees' Experiences of Integration*, by G. Atfield, K. Brahmhatt and T. O'Toole and can be downloaded from www.refugeecouncil.org.uk. The research looked at what it felt like to be a refugee being integrated in UK society, in order to provide a foundation for action on policy and practice. Refugees were recruited to interview other refugees in two areas: Haringey, in North London, and Dudley, in the West Midlands. Haringey has an established tradition of welcoming asylum seekers, while Dudley has less experience of this.

Jonathan Ellis described the policy context within which the research took place. This includes the wider discussion of migration and citizenship, the Home Office definition of 'integration', and the impact of the New Asylum Model (NAM) and the case resolution agenda. Five-year limited leave clearly forms a barrier to integration: with such uncertainty how can someone integrate? The proposed National Refugee Integration Service will be severely limited; it will only affect those

achieving status from April onwards, and will not incorporate those going through the case resolution process. The cuts in English language teaching are unhelpful.

He said that the value of the research is essentially the 'reality of human experiences and stories'. The task for the Refugee Council is to capture individuals' experience but then translate that into what it means for policy, attempting to shift the Home Office agenda by ensuring that the views of asylum seekers and refugees are heard, and heard at the highest levels of government.

Jonathan Ellis set out some of the report's recommendations for national, regional and local action. The recommendations aim to present practical solutions for improving refugee integration. A national asylum policy must start with acceptance that integration begins from day one, not when status is gained. There must be fair and prompt asylum determination processes. The right to work is crucial, and the Refugee Council will shortly be starting a campaign on this. There must be access to decent benefits, English language and other educational opportunities, and health care. NAM case owners have a key role to play in relation to integration.

A critical aspect of national refugee policy must be an end to the five-year limit on leave to remain. The research findings suggest that there would be great value in ensuring the inclusion of refugees in mainstream central and local service delivery. A key point in the report is the role of social networks and of RCOs in 'bonding' and 'bridging': providing initial security, and then going on to act as bridges helping refugees engage with a wider section of the community. More substantial support would increase their capacity to aid integration.

Refugee integration needs to be taken into account when developing regional strategies, and there should be consistency between national and regional strategies. At a local level, community cohesion can be enhanced by challenging negative perceptions, ensuring that information is made available to local communities, and involving refugees and settled communities together in local planning. Employment, education and training are key, and will require more English language teaching, accessible childcare, job support and mentoring, and more work on recognising qualifications and assisting occupational groups into work (as in the Refugees into Teaching project).

Jonathan Ellis then described key issues coming out of the two case study authorities. In Haringey these were the importance of developing a refugee integration strategy; meeting needs through mainstream strategies; sharing good practice; involving refugees, asylum seekers and RCOs in local planning; and supporting RCOs to provide inclusive services. In Dudley, the key issues emerging were mainstreaming refugee integration; how new arrivals are welcomed and helped to feel safe; the importance of local media and the need for decent public information; sharing in local decision making; and working with RCOs.

He concluded by saying the report is really powerful because it allows the voice of individual refugees to speak out. The three clearest lessons for effective integration are the vital role of English language, the vital role of work and the vital role of RCOs.

A delegate said she had been pleased to hear mention of mainstreaming. This seems particularly important in relation to Local Area Agreements, through which community cohesion funding will be directed. Jonathan Ellis confirmed the importance of refugee involvement in these and in Local Strategic Partnerships. He noted that the role of Refugee Council regional staff is increasingly to help RCOs and refugee forums to get involved in such mainstream bodies. It is exciting to see what can be achieved when refugees' voices are heard.

Morning session: panel discussion

In addition to **Leonie McCarthy** and **Danny Sriskandarajah**, the panel included **Olvia Fellas** (Head of Refugee and Migrant Services, Islington Council), **Nargis Khan** (Hackney Councillor and member of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion) and **Bereket Loul** (Community Development Worker, Touchstone Community Development Services, Leeds). Delegates' questions covered a wide range of topics, including joint working between voluntary and statutory sectors, the concerns of established communities, inclusion of 'refugee' as a category in ethnic recordkeeping, routes into employment, and Government policies working against integration, as well as the more general issues of 'why integrate?'; links between rights, privileges and citizenship; and the value or otherwise of the word 'asylum'.

In response to a question to Leonie McCarthy about productive working between statutory, voluntary and community groups, she commented that relationships among frontline workers were often good, but there could be problems with 'management structures that don't want to change'; in Peterborough some local residents initially said they were going to vote BNP because issues affecting them weren't being dealt with effectively. Now agency managers have become much more flexible. As an example, she described joint initiatives between the police, New Link and migrant community groups to ensure that press coverage of issues such as drink-driving avoided 'labelling' whole communities.

Panel members put forward a number of ideas about what more could be done to address the concerns established communities have about newly-arrived communities. These included the responsibility of local authorities to ensure fair allocation of services, and to challenge myths and carry out the necessary media work to do so effectively. There was also a suggestion of a responsibility on everyone (including the Government) not to panic; clearly there are pressure points but the more serious situations may well be confined to a few towns.

Should employers be asked to add 'refugee' to the categories used in ethnic record keeping? Although recognising the need for fuller data about refugees, and agreeing that local authorities and central government have a responsibility to give a lead to other employers in relation to employing refugees, there were mixed feelings about using this method. One panel member pointed out that being a refugee is a legal status, not an identity.

In response to a question about routes into employment, an example was given of the way in which application forms and interview arrangements (such as role-play) might work against applicants from new communities. When re-examined, any benefits traditional practices might have were clearly outweighed by the benefits of employing a wider group of people. Donna Covey drew attention to the Refugee Council's work with trade unions on the right of asylum seekers to work, including a fringe meeting at the TUC conference and the planned campaign on the issue.

There was agreement that some Government policies work against integration, with a 'disconnect' between Government talk about integration and cohesion, and the reality of policies for asylum seekers. Among those mentioned were the minimal and demoralising level of financial support coupled with refusal to let asylum seekers work, dispersal, constraints on health care, refused asylum seekers unable to return home being forced into destitution, the adverse mental health consequences of the stressful asylum process (documented by the Royal College of Psychiatrists), and the five-year rule for those who gain status. It was noted that sometimes harsh Government policies, such as removals, can arouse a sense of injustice in settled communities and galvanise them to take action to defend individual asylum seekers. One panel member pointed to changes at local levels in the past year: as the salience of community cohesion has increased, central government is encouraging locally-driven effort within the national framework.

Why integrate? Panel members suggested that the alternative was 'social exclusion, which could have dire implications'. Integration is about the whole population, not just about new arrivals making a special effort; it is about celebrating diversity, learning from each other and enriching people's lives. On the question of rights and privileges, it was noted that 'citizenship' is a word with multiple meanings; perhaps it would be helpful to differentiate 'Citizenship' – the formal adoption of UK nationality – and the exercise of 'citizenship' in building communities with a sense of belonging. Helpful clarification may come from Lord Goldsmith's Review. In relation to the word 'asylum', there was some feeling that it had been irretrievably damaged by the way it has been used in the media in recent years.

Afternoon session: speakers

The first speaker after lunch was **Inderjit Bhogal**, Director, Yorkshire and Humber Faith Forum, and Founder and Chair, City of Sanctuary. His talk was on **City of Sanctuary: building a culture of hospitality for refugees and asylum seekers**. He is a Methodist Minister and a former President of the Methodist Conference, and has been awarded the OBE for his contribution to interfaith relations.

During Refugee Week in June 2007, the Lord Mayor of Sheffield announced that Sheffield City Council had declared support for Sheffield as a City of Sanctuary. In his talk Inderjit Bhogal described the origins of the concept of City of Sanctuary, its aims and how it has developed in Sheffield.

He said that the objective is to create a culture of welcome and hospitality for asylum seekers, refugees and other vulnerable migrants. The work is urgent and important in light of much open hostility and hatred towards people who flee persecution or poverty and come here seeking protection and security. He himself had come to the UK with his family as a refugee in 1964. In the years since then he has observed (and often challenged) developments in immigration and asylum laws and procedures which in many ways have been 'monstrous'.

About 25 years ago he became part of a movement to protest against unjust deportations. Sometimes this involved people taking sanctuary in churches or mosques, not to avoid or evade the law but to challenge it publicly, and to seek a response from government. Ten years ago he walked from Sheffield Town Hall to 10 Downing Street with a letter to the Prime Minister asking that asylum seekers should not be detained in conventional prisons as they are not criminals.

He described the roots of sanctuary as thousands of years old, having their basis in such diverse cultures as ancient Egyptian, Hebrew and Greek. The Hebrew tradition enshrined the experience of a formerly oppressed people into the legal code of their new society when six towns of refuge were established according to legislation set out in the Book of Numbers 35:6-34. These towns were able to give refuge to anyone, including a foreigner who was accused of manslaughter, thus preventing the automatic use of blood feud as a rough, ready and often indiscriminately unfair route to justice. Through its adoption by the Christian Church this tradition provided the basis for the incorporation of sanctuary into the life of Western Europe. With the transition of the Church from a persecuted sect into an officially recognised and promoted religion, sanctuary became legally recognised, although always subject to certain restrictions.

Inderjit Bhogal said that he began to wonder two years ago whether Sheffield might become a recognised City of Sanctuary for asylum seekers and refugees. He had noticed the development of the idea of fair trade towns or cities, in which a wide range of community groups and organisations make a commitment to using and selling fairly traded goods. In a similar way, might a City of Sanctuary be a place where schools, community groups, faith groups and cultural organisations, as

well as local government, committed themselves to offering hospitality and support to refugees and asylum seekers?

He pointed out that it can be difficult to feel a sense of achievement or progress towards a more humane society when constantly reacting to ever-harsher legislation and media coverage. Working towards City of Sanctuary status might provide a positive common goal and aspiration for a wide variety of organisations and individuals. It could embody a set of explicit objectives for those signing up to the initiative, and broadening support for the idea could influence the culture of the city as a whole.

Sheffield seemed to him ideally placed to be the first city to become a City of Sanctuary. It has an excellent record of support for asylum seekers and refugees, and a diverse and thriving multicultural population. Following a meeting in October 2005 to discuss the idea, many organisations adopted a resolution supporting the goal. Thus far, over 70 organisations have signed up, including community organisations, worship centres, the student unions of both Sheffield universities, leaders from different faiths, a number of businesses, and the City Council. The City of Sanctuary Committee is now carrying out consultations in order to prepare a statement of vision and goals.

A delegate from Sheffield City Council said that the Council was very pleased to support City of Sanctuary; he noted that Sheffield had been the first local authority to participate in the Gateway Protection Programme. It is recognised that some people are open to newcomers while others are hostile; it is important to get people to see individuals from abroad as individuals, rather than as stereotypes. Another delegate, also from Sheffield, raised the issue of asylum seekers and refugees living in areas where drug dealing, criminal activity and anti-social behaviour are common. They feel trapped; they have no effective choice of accommodation as they will lose their benefits if they move. Inderjit Bhogal said he was concerned about both the level and nature of contact between refugees and their neighbours. Some asylum seekers and refugees feel threatened by their neighbours, and some neighbours feel threatened by new arrivals. He said it is 'up to you and me to speak up – it is about protection, security'. Donna Covey noted that some Refugee Council staff were looking at what role the Council might play in extending the concept of City of Sanctuary.

Roger Kline, National Head of Equality and Employment Rights, University and College Union (UCU), then spoke on **Widening participation in further and higher education**. Roger Kline has worked for several trade unions. He has written handbooks on health service professional accountability and safe practice, and handbooks and booklets on trade union rights and campaigns. He was head of higher education at the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFE) before its 2006 merger with the Association of University Teachers to become UCU. He has played a leading role in UCU's campaign to defend English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision and is the trade union member of the Equality Challenge Unit Board.

In his talk he discussed English-language provision, education for refugees and asylum seekers, and the situation of refugees with teaching or other professional qualifications. Throughout he drew attention to conflicting Government policies, and policies with unintended consequences.

Roger Kline said that in autumn 2006 Ministers were promoting ESOL, a programme so successful that potential students (including refugees and asylum seekers) were queuing up for courses; there were tens of thousands of people on waiting lists around the country. The policy of promoting ESOL was publicly praised by Gordon Brown as making a valuable contribution to Government priorities of improving social cohesion and tackling the isolation of migrant communities. However, access was radically reduced without warning. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) announced that ESOL courses would no longer attract automatic fee remission, so asylum seekers would not be eligible automatically for free tuition; and from 2007/2008 asylum seekers aged 19+ would no longer be eligible for publicly-funded further education provision.

After an intensive campaign by UCU, the Refugee Council and many others, changes were announced in March 2007. Asylum seekers still waiting for a decision after six months will be eligible for LSC funding, as will people refused asylum who are receiving Section 4 support because they are unable to return to their country of origin due to circumstances beyond their control.

Roger Kline pointed out that the only justification given for cutting ESOL provision was financial: the budget was seriously overspent. Outcomes relating to community cohesion, savings in translation costs, safety at work and long-term benefits to the economy were all disregarded. Yet the Government continues to stress the need for migrant communities to learn English, and there are now English language requirements for indefinite leave to remain.

Roger Kline argued that there are echoes of such 'policy paralysis' and 'unintended consequences' in other parts of the educational experience of refugees and asylum seekers. There has been substantial investment in education in recent years, and considerable progress in introducing policies, strategies and practice guidance in relation to the education of asylum-seeking and refugee children. However, there remain inherent contradictions between different Government policies and strategies. League tables make schools cautious about whom they admit. Poor staffing ratios and inadequate funding make individual support increasingly difficult. Top-up fees in higher education deter the poorest students or force them to work long hours to fund their courses.

In relation to refugees with professional skills and experience, he stressed the need for more funding for projects such as the Refugee Council's Refugees into Teaching, and a better system for assessing and validating overseas qualifications. More bridging courses would enable refugees to convert their qualifications for use in the UK.

Some Government education policies have been helpful, but 'overall we have fallen well short of what we could and should do'. The policy shortfall is not a failure by teachers and lecturers, many thousands of whom 'do a fantastic job' supporting refugees and asylum seekers. And the shortfall does not result from lack of evidence about what works best. Rather, 'evidence-based policy and moral purpose have been sacrificed to political expediency' although spending on education for refugees and asylum seekers is an investment in all our futures.

Roger Kline concluded by saying that, 'like the overwhelming majority of this country's population', his forbears were refugees - in his case Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe. His wife is a South African health professional, and his mother is cared for by African-Caribbean and Polish care workers. He argued that the country is richer for the contribution of refugees and migrants. Policy should be led by evidence-based research and informed by our common humanity.

The third speaker in the afternoon was **Jon Williams**, Senior LORECA (London Refugee Economic Action) Manager. He spoke on **London's approach to improving the employment prospects for refugees**. He has extensive experience in the statutory, voluntary and community sectors. Since 2000 he has worked on projects related to refugees and asylum seekers at the Refugee Council and on secondment to the Home Office, where he set up and led the International Asylum Policy Unit, which developed the Gateway Protection Programme and the Assisted Voluntary Return Programme. Back at the Refugee Council, he headed the Resettlement Interagency Team before leaving in 2005 to lead LORECA.

Jon Williams said that significant work is taking place in London on improving refugees' employability, with clear political commitment to this. In his talk he outlined the structures which have been developed, and how implementation delivers on the equality and diversity agenda. He also described some of the challenges to implementing an effective and sustainable plan in this area.

Unfortunately there is a lack of sufficient comprehensive, clear data about London. The population is very diverse, with complex needs. Many people have high qualifications that are currently underutilised by London's economy. The estimated refugee and asylum seeker population is 400,000-450,000. The employment rate for refugees is estimated to average out to 30 per cent across communities, but, for example, the estimated Somali employment rate is 16 per cent. There are concerns that the challenges faced by some refugee communities are becoming generational.

Refugee employment services are uncoordinated and fragmented. Good practice exists, and individual projects demonstrate effective and innovative methods of moving refugees closer to the labour market. However, comprehensive support to overcome the barriers they face is difficult to find; at the same time there is some duplication of services. Funders share significant responsibility for this, as there is little or no coordination among them. A great deal of confusion and wasted effort results from the differing requirements of different funders.

The London Development Agency (LDA) has supported the setting up of a new organisation, London Funders, to give them the opportunity to meet and coordinate their activity; a sub-group is focusing on funding for refugee activity. In addition, the LDA has been working with Jobcentre Plus and the Learning and Skills Council to develop a multi-agency approach to their work. A practical example is East and West London City Strategy Pathfinders: existing funds from the three agencies for these areas are being coordinated to develop a more coherent service for unemployed people. Developments in the Mayor's powers (such as the London Skills and Employment Board) will allow him to focus more effectively on equality of opportunity.

London Refugee Economic Action (LORECA) was created because of recognition that refugee employment services need much better coordination. Through its structures, those working with refugees can advocate for policies and processes that will ensure that the London economy benefits fully from the pool of skills and experience that refugees have to offer. LORECA focuses on strategy and policy. It is the link body on employment, training and enterprise to the Mayor's Board for Refugee Integration in London, and is a discrete unit within the LDA's Equality and Diversity Team. LORECA can thus access policy and programme development throughout London's regional government structure.

The task is to change the current dynamic of uncoordinated services into a coordinated service environment. However, implementation is not easy. Realism is required. The Mayor has explained that he will have to promote the refugee integration strategy to major funders, and seek its alignment to other strategies. It may thus be 10 years before the true impact of this work can be assessed.

Jon Williams outlined the plan for London as including:

- effective guidance in the form of employment, training and enterprise (ETE) 'Maps'
- identification of selected employers to operate work placement programmes
- review of services to inform future delivery of ETE provision to ensure it is more efficient and sustainable, developing more effective community outreach provision and building on current social landlord initiatives
- review of the current accreditation system to ensure refugee qualifications and overseas work experience are given proper weight
- review to consider how to increase enterprise opportunities for refugees
- an enquiry to understand how refugees work in the informal sector (with its potential for exploitation) and consideration of potential exit routes.

LORECA clearly has a key role to play as link body to the Mayor's Board for Refugee Integration on employment, training and enterprise, and its strategic position means it can access statutory agencies critical to moving towards greater integration for London's refugee population. However, the crucial role is that played by the Board. If refugees are truly to experience equality of opportunity in London, the Board must push for the effective implementation of the strategy and must demonstrate the ability to overcome blockages when they are encountered. There is an important role for the refugee sector in the whole process and the Mayor is seeking to implement the strategy in partnership with the refugee sector. Many ideas in the strategy come from pioneering work in the sector, and these need to be built on.

The challenges which implementation of the strategy faces include:

- finding an appropriate and effective mix of qualitative and quantitative methods of evaluation to measure impact
- the widening inequality in London, with current social and economic factors undermining the equality and diversity agenda
- possible tightening of the UK economy, leading to lack of sufficient investment in the services required to support those, like refugees, far from the labour market
- the continuing difficult debate around asylum and immigration.

Jon Williams concluded by saying that the work being undertaken in London offers real hope. Both the Mayor's support and the active involvement of refugee communities are vital for this work, but it will take time to see real movement.

A delegate expressed concern at Jon Williams' statement that it would take 10 years to see any meaningful impact of the strategy; surely it should be possible to make some impact within the first few years? Jon Williams stressed that the changes proposed for London were significant, however they have to be seen in the context of the challenges faced in London in bringing a group 'far from the labour market' to a position of accessing the job market. This has resulted in recent changes in approach by the Department of Work and Pensions, which is restructuring services to better support the most excluded into the labour market.

The Mayor's strategy actually has a four-year implementation plan and it is hoped that there will be some movement within that period, but realistically real movement will take longer. The groups being targeted 'are very far from the labour market', and unfortunately the situation seems to be getting worse. Another delegate raised the issue of asylum seekers not being allowed to work, and asked whether the Mayor could urge on the Government the value of helping people into work earlier. Jon Williams said he understood that the Mayor's view was that asylum seekers should be allowed to work after six months.

The final speaker was **Heather Petch**, Director, Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (hact). Her talk was on **Housing: new homes for new lives?** She has over 20 years' experience in the housing, homelessness, anti-poverty and community fields as a front-line adviser, board member, researcher, policy analyst, activist and director. She has been a member of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Immigration and Inclusion Committee, and is a trustee of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. She was recently awarded an OBE for services to social justice.

Heather Petch began by stressing the importance of housing for integration. It is very difficult for people to access other services or feel settled until they have housing. Unfortunately, although housing is such a fundamental resource, housing as a policy area and housing providers tend to be rather isolated.

The title given to her talk could only be seen as aspirational. The reality is a huge and growing need for housing, desperate overcrowding (especially among refugees and new migrants), destitution and increased insecurity within neighbourhoods.

For many years hact has been resourcing RCOs' housing advice work. However, the situation has been frustrating for all concerned as results have been limited. Hact therefore decided to set up structured partnerships with RCOs. Many housing providers may want to be supportive, but don't know where to start; hact always advises 'talk to the communities'. RCOs are critical resources: they understand the needs, speak the language, and have tremendous expertise.

Hact's vision is of people living in independence, with dignity, in inclusive neighbourhoods. Its mission is pioneering housing solutions for people on the margins. When looking at housing problems of refugees what is needed is to identify the problem, identify players to work with who are key to making change, and test and evaluate solutions. Accommodate, hact's Refugee Housing Partnership Project, has just been completed after five years; learning from the project will be disseminated over the coming year (www.hact.org.uk). The project aimed to:

- improve housing and support services
- empower refugee community organisations
- develop replicable models which could change policy and practice
- demonstrate different ways of working through building partnerships
- meet local needs through trying out different models and sharing the learning nationally.

Applicants for an Accommodate grant were given £5,000 over four months to prepare a plan. Those who were successful received a grant of £50,000 over two years. Projects were located in Birmingham, Bolton, Leeds, Sheffield and Bradford, and in Wales. In each case the partnerships included RCOs, a strategic body (usually the local authority, but in Sheffield the primary care trust) and housing providers (usually housing associations).

In Birmingham, the Family Housing Association worked to give refugees a voice in a housing market renewal area; during this time the Association came across a building which it was able to offer as office space for eight RCOs. In Bolton, the partners were Bolton Community Homes (a strategic body led by the local authority), Irwell Housing Association and New Bolton Somali Community Association (NBSCA). The aim was to map the needs of the Somali community, at that time the fastest-growing new community in Bolton. The research, carried out by NBSCA, has influenced Bolton's community strategy, and led to an offer to NBSCA of some properties where large families in dire housing need can have space until more permanent housing is found.

In Leeds the Canopy Housing Project had been working for about 10 years with young people excluded from school or who had been through the criminal justice system, refurbishing empty houses. The Project applied for Accommodate funding to engage refugees in this work. Ten properties have been refurbished for refugees, and the way the young people have been working alongside refugees on site has been very inspiring: a strong community cohesion element.

Accommodate in Sheffield aimed to increase awareness and expertise in relation to mental health issues among refugee communities. The partnership, led by MAAN (Somali Mental Health Project), has been working with Somali and other refugee communities. It has had some influence; there is now a specific Supporting People strategy for refugees in Sheffield, one of the few places in the country where that has happened. In Bradford, led by the Manningham Housing Association, the partnership focus was on providing a one-stop shop for people having to find an alternative to NASS accommodation within 28 days. In Sheffield and Bradford, and to some extent in the other projects, there has been work on how refugees are affected by choice-based letting systems.

The work in Wales has been concerned with private providers. A housing association has been working with RCOs in Newport, encouraging landlords both to let to refugees and to improve standards.

All those who participated in the projects feel that the work was enriched because it was done in partnership. However, it took time to get some of the partnerships off the ground: building partnerships requires time and trust. RCOs have to be empowered and resourced to participate adequately, and a clear focus for the work has to be agreed. Larger agencies also need to build their capacity to work with RCOs.

Heather Petch mentioned hact's other projects, including the Older People's Programme. Under this programme the Latin American Women's Rights Service had three-year funding to access better quality single housing for older refugees; in the course of this the worker became involved in other issues, including elder abuse.

Refugee housing faces both threats and opportunities. The threats include housing shortages and rising demand, restricted access and destitution, the complexity of the housing system and the 28 day problem. On the other hand, the Government is committed to increasing housing – but we need to influence where that supply is, whether it is appropriate, and who gets access to it. Decreased refugee numbers may allow for some specialist arrangements for refugees. Finally, there is opportunity in the aspirations, aptitudes and skills of refugees.

In conclusion, Heather Petch stressed the importance of:

- identifying needs and key players
- building relationships with settled as well as new communities, especially where there are concerns about safety in neighbourhoods
- building relationships with providers, and with local authority strategy officers
- ensuring that the needs of refugees are put on the agendas of Local Area Agreements and of Regional Housing Boards
- networking and facilitating relationships, given housing's tendency to be isolated.

Afternoon session: panel discussion

The panel included **Roger Kline** and **Heather Petch**, and also **Theodros Abraham** (Lecturer at Birkbeck College, University of London, and Director of Reconnect, a not-for-profit refugee organisation) and **James Lee** (Refugee Council Policy Adviser, Training & Employment). As in the morning panel discussion, delegates' questions covered a wide range of issues. The first questions were to Roger Kline and Heather Petch, following on from their presentations.

Roger Kline was asked what was impeding asylum seeker access to higher education, and what could be done to facilitate access. He said the main problem was classification as overseas students, with the consequent fees. He and other panel members said it was important that asylum seekers should be recognised as part of the community and reclassified as home students; the overall financial implications would not be great. Some universities were already exercising their discretion to do this. However, there were issues about sufficient support at earlier stages of education, to enable entry to higher education; and about the level of fees and living costs even if they were reclassified as home students. In Scotland, there were moves to allow asylum seekers who had been in the country three years, completed secondary school in Scotland and were aged under 25 to be treated like any other home student. Although access to higher education is limited, some useful educational opportunities are available. At Birkbeck, for example, there are certificate and diploma courses (such as the Certificate in Higher Education); RCOs have established some training initiatives; and funding from the private sector can still benefit asylum seekers.

Heather Petch was asked whether she thought that social housing associations are better than public agencies at negotiating relations with private sector landlords. She said firmly 'no – it varies hugely'. However, there are two very different roles. Local authorities have responsibility for regulation and enforcement. In 2004 they were given additional powers, particularly in relation to houses in multiple occupation; unfortunately they have not been using those powers sufficiently to protect new migrants. Housing associations are able to function more flexibly (although this depends on individuals and priorities) so it can be easier for them to engage with private landlords – who are a critical source of accommodation especially for single people. In response to a question from Donna Covey about what could be learned from the experience of the housing sector, Heather Petch described housing as 'the most contested resource'; political leadership and transparency are therefore essential. Also, 'you can't beat people getting together and doing things together', although housing providers don't do enough to encourage that.

Another question concerned the role of different agencies in working with settled communities both prior to and following the arrival of new groups. One panel member argued that there was a need to raise awareness of why people were seeking asylum, but this shouldn't be to arouse pity so much as to increase understanding of the global context of displacement. Individual panel members offered examples of actions by their own agencies. For example, the Refugee Council is encouraging the development of volunteer Talks Teams to give talks in secondary schools and other settings. At Birkbeck, there was originally one course about refugee issues; now public interest has increased so much that there are 20 courses. In relation to ESOL, some unions' campaigning has been based on industry-related concerns, while for others it is a matter of general social responsibility.

What can we do to make sure the Government understands that it's not just a matter of employment? Responses to this question were varied, with one panel member noting that over-emphasis on just getting a job leads to neglect of wider issues about economic inclusion. Giving employment advice to refugees is a specialist task, but such advice can't just be about employment when other issues, such as mental and physical health, are likely to arise; and the Government needs to understand that, for effective employment, people need a stable place to live. A panel member suggested that the tendency is to react to specific Government statements or initiatives, but when reacting to these it was important to set the particular issue within the wider holistic context.

Another question concerned the prospects for achieving community cohesion, given the increasing polarisation between rich and poor. There was agreement that more resources were required if progress was to be made: 'these things don't just happen'. Several panel members thought the concept of 'community cohesion' was unclear; indeed, the definition used by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion was different from that used by the Department of Communities and Local Government. Concerns about community cohesion are focused on areas of poverty and inequality, yet some places that are cohesive but poor are monocultural with serious social problems and a far from progressive cohesion. In the education field, the Government is about to issue guidance on tackling extremism on campus. This is going to be done as part of the community cohesion agenda, on an assumption that there is agreement on shared values around which we can cohere. It ignores institutions' equality duties under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, and there is a real risk that the whole emphasis is intended to be on Muslim extremists.

In response to a question about bridging the gap between policy and practice, a panel member stressed the basic need for mutual respect, with refugee communities being seen as having something to offer. Another panel member pointed to the value of bringing policymakers face to face with refugees and asylum seekers, as had been done in the ESOL campaign when Bill Rammell MP had met ESOL learners. In answer to the question of what we can learn from other countries, panel members drew attention to the role of 'cultural mediators' embedded within the German version of Jobcentre Plus; to the Spanish policy of giving asylum seekers the right to work after six months; and to the UN and development NGOs as employers of refugees. In Canada, immigration is generally seen as positive, but there are some signs currently of hostility towards refugees; discussions of migration must keep specific space for refugee issues.

Concluding the conference, Donna Covey expressed her appreciation and thanks to all the speakers and delegates for such a lively and participative day.

The Refugee Council is very grateful to Naomi Connelly, Refugee Council volunteer, for her help in creating this report.

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